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Beta'd by Twin Kats

A/N: This is the sequel of"Learn from History". You would be able to better understand this story if you have read the first part.

"The heart may be weak. And sometimes it may even give in to the darkness. But I believe that deep down, there's a light that never goes out!"

- Kingdom Hearts

Friend or Foe

Prologue

A flash of green light... darkness... a small cupboard... the Dursley's... rejection... Freak... school... Dudley... lonely... Hagrid... Hogwarts letter... Diagon Alley... Hogwarts Express... the Weasley... Ron... Sorting... Gryffindor... Hermione... Fluffy... the Sorcerer's stone... Quirrell... Ginny... the Chamber of Secrets... the Basilisk... Aunt Marge... Sirius... Professor Lupin... Wormtail... Triwizard Tournament... the killing curse... Cedric's dead body... pain... blood... Voldemort's return...the Order of Phoenix... Grimmauld Place...

Harry clenched his head with his hands and shut his eyes tightly as memories rushed back. The pain was so severe that he felt as if his head was going to burst open. Yet... what hurt him most was not his headache...

Tom Riddle...

Voldemort...

Harry drew his knees up to his chest and rested his head on them. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know what to think...

Harry looked down at the necklace Tom gave him and held the crystal tightly in his hand. He could feel the power emerging from it. Yet the strong and protective power, rather than gave him comfort, only hurt him even more.

"Why... Tom..." he muttered softly.

Why?

Chapter 1: Being Harry Again

"Harry!" someone shouted. He heard the door was slammed open and footsteps approaching him. "Oh, here you are, Harry."

Harry slowly opened his eyes. He looked around and found himself in sitting beside the wall of the drawing room. Looking up he finally saw the source of the sound; Ronald Weasley was standing before him waving his hand in front of his face.

"Are you alright, mate?" asked Ron. "Mum was really worried when she couldn't find you in our room."

Harry would have been really annoyed for the overprotective behavior if he didn't have so many things in his mind.

"I won't be stupid enough to leave this house, Ron," he answered weakly.

"What are you doing here anyway?" asked Ron.

Harry shrugged. "I can't sleep," he answered simply.

He was not ready to tell Ron... tell anyone about his little "trip" at the moment, not even Sirius. Then again, who would believe him? Traveled back in time for a year when no time had actually passed? He didn't even age! Well, maybe the scar on his arm would convince them, but Ron and Sirius would surely have a fit when they found out he was sorted into Slytherin. He didn't want Sirius to be disappointed in him. Besides, he didn't think it would be wise to say his best friend was Tom Riddle in the middle of the Order of the Phoenix's headquarter. He stomach sink as he thought of Tom. It was so wrong that the boy he once knew had become the merciless Dark Lord, who he hated for the past five years, who killed his parents, who made him an orphan and gave him a horrible childhood. But after the year he spent with Tom... he did not know what to think of him anymore.

"Is it your... scar?" Ron's tentative question brought him back to reality.

"No, I'm fine," Harry answered coolly. He stood up and shoved off the dust on his clothes. "Let's go downstairs before your Mum become too worried," he said and hurried out of the room.

Harry had a hard time to catch up on what happened lately. After all, for him, what happened "recently" meant what happened a year before. He did not tell anyone what happened though some of them did notice he was acting differently than before. His friends were worried about him and he must admit that they had good reasons to. He was much quieter and was not at all keen on hearing any information concerning Voldemort's activities, which was really unusual for his "normal" self.

After the experience of living as a normal teenager for a year, Harry found it hard to accept who his really was. He was The Boy Who Lived, the so- called savior of the world, the subject of humiliation in the Daily Prophet, and the target of both the Ministry and... Voldemort. He didn't want to have his old life back. Sometimes he really hope he had forced to stay in the past and remained to be Alex, a boy without any memory of his past, and without the heavy burden of the world.

"Harry?" Hermione stopped him one night before he went to bed.

Harry groaned inwardly. He had been under great pressure lately and anyone who dared to ask him "Are you alright, Harry?" or "What happened to you, Harry?" again would trigger him to explode. Actually it was a miracle that he hadn't pissed off at them already; but if he had learned anything from living among the Slytherins for a year, that was the importance of controlling ones emotions; it was foolish to lost control of oneself easily.

"What's it, Hermione?" said Harry lazily.

"What happened to you, Harry? You've been acting strange," said Hermione in her usual lecture manner. "We are worrying about you and you kept ignoring us. We just want to help..."

"Then leave me alone," Harry interrupted in his calm but dangerous voice and retreated to his room before Hermione could respond.

Harry had tried his best to avoid anything that concerned Voldemort and had been busying himself in cleaning or studying so as to stop

himself from thinking about Tom. He couldn't face it; the more he thought about it, the deeper it hurt him. He had been avoiding that topic since he came back but finally cracked on the day when he received his Hogwarts letter.

Harry was not bothered by the fact that Ron and Hermione were made prefect this year but not him. He wondered why he didn't feel anything after hearing the news, but then, he had been blocking his own emotions and barely felt anything recently. Compared with what really bothered him, losing the prefect badge to his friend was nothing at all.

They didn't need to go to Diagon Alley to purchase their books this year; the order members would do all the work for them. Harry recognized several books on his list, which he had already studied. He was going to attend the fifth year classes again this year, since he still hadn't told anyone that he had already had his fifth year education fifty years ago.

While Ron and Hermione were celebrating, Moody pulled Harry aside and showed him an old photo of the order members last time. Harry's stomach clenched as he saw those familiar faces beaming at him. He felt sick when Moody started to introduce the people in the photo and told him what happened to them during the war. Neville's parents... his own parents... Sirius... all other order members... they were so happy, so proud of being able to fight for what they always believed. Harry couldn't stand looking at all those happy faces. He couldn't help but think about how the war destroyed them... how Tom Riddle ruined their lives.

Harry excused himself and went back to his room. He needed to be alone, to think and to organize his thoughts. But before he reached his room, he heard someone sobbing in the drawing room. He reached for his wand and opened the door of the room cautiously.

Harry gasped at what he saw in the room. Mrs. Weasley was sobbing, with a dead body lying before her... Ron's body! But it couldn't be, Ron was downstairs...

"Riddikulus," Mrs. Weasley sobbed.

Ron's body was replaced by Bill's, then the Twins', Percy's, Harry's...

Harry was stunned by the sight. He vaguely heard Lupin entered the room and cleared the Boggart.

For a long time Harry just stood there, watching Lupin comforted Mrs. Weasley. He could imagine how horrible it must be for Mrs. Weasley; all those she cared for died before her eyes. Harry thought back of the photo he saw just now and wondered how many time a similar scene had happened in the past, and how many would happen in the future.

All Voldemort's doing...

Harry shut his eyes. He could no longer hide from it. Voldemort was the one who created this havoc... and he was the one who created Voldemort. If he had spent more time talking with Tom; if he had took the boy's tendency towards the darkness more seriously, Voldemort would not exist.

It was his fault...
Harry needed someone to talk to. He did not know what he should do; he only knew he couldn't just stay there and do nothing to stop Voldemort. Normally he would ask Dumbledore for help, but Harry didn't want to tell him what happened, at least, not yet. Other then the fact that Dumbledore had been ignoring him, he didn't trust the man to give him a fair advice regarding Tom Riddle. He needed someone he could trust, someone who already knew what happened. Harry smiled weakly; the answer was obvious...

Dear Nicolas,

I am back. I need to talk to you.

Harry wrote a short note which he was sure no one would understand even if it was intercepted. He hesitated before signing his name:

Alex

Harry had been doing quite a lot of thinking since the day he found Mrs. Weasley sobbing in the drawing room. He was confused, expecially when he thought of what he regarded Tom Riddle as. Did he still consider Voldemort as his enemy? Or did he consider him as a dear friend?

Day drew by quickly and it was time for Harry to go back to Hogwarts. The last few weeks in Grimmauld Place were stressful; the only good news was that he no longer had those nightmares, which Harry assumed was because of his mastering Occlumency.

Harry sat in the same compartment with Ginny, Neville and a Ravenclaw called Luna Lovegood during the ride to Hogwarts. The whole journey was uneventful, at first, until Draco Malfoy and his two body guards broke in soon after Ron and Hermione joined them.

"Sod off, Malfoy!" said Ron, standing up.

"Manners, Weasley," said Malfoy. He stared at Ron's prefect badge. "I wonder what my father will say; a Weasley and a Mudblood being prefects."

Ron's face glowed red and looked as if he was going to lunge at Malfoy anytime soon.

"No, Ron!" Hermione held Ron's arm tightly, holding him back.

Malfoy turned to face Harry, but Harry cut him off before he could say anything.

"If you are going to throw me any insults, do so and leave," said Harry calmly. He was in no mood to argue with the blonde.

Malfoy looked surprised. He stared at Harry with narrowed eyes and studied him closely.

Harry didn't averted Malfoy's eyes. He stared back at him coolly and dangerously, as he always did when Lestrange and the other Slytherins insulted him or Tom.

Malfoy held his gaze for a while before turning away. He looked puzzled at Harry's reaction but said nothing of it. The blonde nodded at Crabbe and Goyle and left the compartment without any other word.

Ron and Hermione stared at him with strange expressions, but Harry ignored them. He stared at the retreating back of Malfoy. Strangely, he didn't hate him as much as he had been before. The blonde before him reminded him of Coilean Lestrange and many other Slytherins which came from pureblood family that he once knew. It was true that they were annoying and arrogant, but the longer Harry stayed with them, the more he realized the lives of those heirs of pureblooded family were not easy at all. They were proud to be a pureblood, as they were taught to be, yet they were also bounded by it. They could not be the person they wanted to be, they couldn't even have their own thoughts. For their whole life they must do their best to live up with their family names.

Draco Malfoy... the blonde had changed over the years. When Harry first met him, he was an arrogant pureblood who enjoyed teasing and mocking others, but starting from his fourth year, he seemed to be... darker. Harry was sure by the influence of Lucius Malfoy, the younger Malfoy would follow his father's footstep and went onto the road of Darkness. In fact, the young Malfoy was already standing at the entrance of that road, if not already in it. Harry would have left him be, normally, after all the young Malfoy becaming a Death Eater was not unexpected; that only gave Harry one more reason to hate him. But now, Harry felt uneasy. He did not want to watch the history repeated itself, he did not want to witness another person fell into the hand of darkness again, not if he could help it. Harry knew what he should do. He would try and stop the young Malfoy from taking that road.

Harry didn't talk much during the feast. It felt strange to be among the Gryffindors again. He felt... out of place. He listened to the conversations around him absentmindedly and frowned as Ron talked about what happened in the train and how evil the Slytherins were. Yes, the Slytherins were cunning, but that did not make them evil. Most Slytherins were prejudiced against those who were not pureblood, as they were taught to be, but they were not heartless. They cared about their housemates, maybe even more so then the

other houses, because no one else would care for them and no outsiders could understand them. Though Harry did not get along too well with the Slytherins when he was part of it and he was not at all agreed with their view of 'blood', he had learned to respect and appreciate their loyalty to their house, and their families.

He sighed; the Gryffindors would never understand this, they were just too... Gryffindor.

'Oh stop it, Harry, you are a Gryffindor, a Gryffindor who is too Gryffindor for his own good,' his inner voice said.

Harry ignored the voice and turned his gaze to the head table. His eyes rested on Umbridge. That toad woman was clearly sent here by the Ministry and he was the one she wanted to control beside Dumbledore.

'Great. Another Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor who hates me,' Harry thought sarcastically.

Next to Umbridge was Dumbledore. The old man was still ignoring him; he didn't even look straight at Harry, as if looking into his eyes hurt...

Hurt? Something stirred in Harry's mind. Nicolas said something about his eyes before; he said he saw another pair of eyes in them after Harry had dreamt of Tom. Then it clicked, Dumbledore did not look into Harry's eyes because Harry and Voldemort were connected. He was afraid Voldemort could use Harry to harm him. A sudden anger rose within Harry. Dumbledore should have told him! The old man simply avoided him and hid the truth from him. What if Harry didn't already know? Voldemort could have possessed him!

Suppressing his anger, Harry turned away from the headmaster; there wasn't anything he could do against him anyway.

Harry found himself staring straight into the narrowed eyes of Snape. The potions master was observing him with a calculating look and the look turned into a glare as he saw Harry looking back at him. Harry held his gaze for a while before averting Snape's eyes. Harry smirked

inwardly. The man would be surprised at how well Harry was at Potions now. After all, how could he not be after spending a year with Nicolas Flamel and Tom Riddle? He wondered how Snape would react if he knew Harry had been sorted into Slytherin; but there was no way Harry would tell Snape what happened anyway.

Harry went back to his meal, laughing and chatting with the other Gryffindors , he might be different now, but coming back to Hogwarts always gave him a warm feeling.

Little did Harry know how many difficult decisions he was going to make this year, each of them would change his life forever and each of them would change the outcome of the wizarding war.
A/N: Not much happened in this chapter, though I did focus a lot on how Harry's changed after that year, which I think would make Harry's behavior in the later chapters more make sense.

Anyway, PLEASE REVIEW!

Edited: 22/11/2005

Chapter 2: Visiting an old friend

Harry and Ron joined Hermione in the Great Hall during breakfast the next morning. Hermione gave them their class schedule and Harry quickly scanned through it. The first lesson today was...

"Potions!" Ron groaned.

"It's not that bad, Ron," said Harry.

"Not that bad!" Ron exclaimed, staring at Harry disbelievingly. "Double Potions on the first day with those bloody Slytherins and the greasy git!"

"Oh, stop acting like a child, Ron," said Hermione. "Every lesson was important for us this year. Don't forget we need to..."

"Take the OWLs this year. I know, Hermione. You've been talking about it for ages," cried Ron.

Lucky for Harry, the arrival of mails stopped the two from further argument. Harry's face lit up as he saw Hedwig flying towards him with a small box tied to her leg. Harry reached out and untied the box. He gave Hedwig the toast he left before opening the box hastily.

Harry was not surprised to fine a stone in the box. The stone was dark blue with an irregular shape.

"What have you got, Harry?" Hermioine asked from beside him.

"What's that? Who sent this to you, mate?" asked Ron, leading forward to have a better look at the stone.

Of course Harry knew who it was from. Who else would send him a stone except a certain old wizard? But if his guess was correct, he knew he would not want Ron and Hermione to see whatever would happen when he touch the stone; so he closed the box and slipped it into the pocket of his robe.

"Nothing special," he lied. "Just something I ordered by mail during the summer."

Hermione frowned. "You are not sending letter to Sirius, right? Professor Dumbledore said it is too dangerous for us to..."

"I know, Hermione. I am not writing to him, don't worry," Harry answered dryly.

Just as they had predicted, Snape made them to brew a very complicated potion on the first potions lesson this year. They all set to work once Snape had finished his speech, stating clearly that only the top students could enter his NEWTs class.

Harry read the instructions on the board three times before getting off to gather his ingredients. The draught of peace. The potion itself was not that difficult to brew actually; it was complicated, but no special skill was required. As long as the brewer followed the instruction closely, there should be no problems in brewing this potion.

Severus Snape was in a bad mood today, and the fact that he was currently facing the fifth year Gryffindors did not help at all. The potion he assigned them to brew today was not at all difficult, though he bet most of them would carelessly miss a step or two and ended up ruining the potion. He could only hope they didn't end up blowing their cauldrons and messing up his classroom. But anything could happen, especially with that worthless Longbottom and Potter in the class. Speaking of Potter...

He shifted his gaze to his nemesis' son and was surprised to find that the boy, unlike the others, did not rush to pick up the ingredients at once. Instead, Potter spent some time to read the instructions before leaving to gather his ingredients. There was nothing special about the action actually; Severus always did that prevent making careless mistakes. But Potter? That boy never regarded instructions as

anything important, like his dead father, and often made mistakes that could easily be avoided. So what made the change?

Well, he was not interested in finding it out more about Potter anyway. He cleared his thought and started to check the students' work.

"A light silver vapour should now be rising from your potion."

Severus walked around the classroom, checking the students' work. Weasley's and Longbottom's potion were total failures; and Granger's, as usual, had nothing that he could criticise, not that he would compliment her of course. He stopped next the Potter's cauldron and looked down at the potion, smirking inwardly at the thought of casting Evanesco at the boy's work. But he was wrong; Potter's potion was almost perfect. For nearly five minutes, he stayed at the same spot, observing his most hated student. Potter didn't even stop or look up at Severus' gaze. In fact, Severus thought Potter did not even aware of his presence, which meant, Potter was brewing his potion with utter concentration. Yes, Potter did change...

After lunch, Harry slipped away and went back to the dorm alone. Ron and Hermione seemed to have developed a closer relationship during the last summer holiday and Harry decided to make good use of it. The thought of being left out made him quite upset, but he needed some time being alone, especially with the whole Voldemort thing disturbing him.

Harry took out the box and observed the stone more closely before touching the stone tentatively. The stone glowed at the touch and within a few seconds it vanished in Harry's hand and was replaced by a letter. Harry blinked before moving on to read it.

Dear Alex,

I am so glad to hear from you, child. It has been a long time. I hope this letter can reach you safely. The stone I used this time ought to

make sure only you can receive this letter, but I dare not take that risk and write more than necessary in this letter.

I know many things are disturbing you, but I do not want you sneak out of Hogwarts, especially not in a time like this. There is much I would like to talk about with you, so how about a visit on your first Hosmeade weekend? You still have the thing I gave you last time we met, right? Please don't put yourself in danger and wait in Hogwarts patiently before that day. If you have any problems, go and find Albus, I am sure he can help you.

N.F.

P.S. I have enclosed something you forgot to take before you left fifty years ago. Congratulations! I am really proud of you.

Harry searched in the envelope and found another parchment in it. What could it be? He was sure he didn't forget anything...

He stopped as he realized what the parchment was. He quickly glanced through the page and his jaw dropped at what he saw.

"Wow..." he whispered in amazement.

Harry gazed down at the parchment again. That was his OWLs result? He knew he did quite well in it, but not that well.

Astronomy: Exceeds expectations

Charms: Exceeds expectations

Defense Against the Dark Arts: Outstanding

Herbology: Exceeds expectations

History of Magic: Acceptable

Potions: Outstanding

Transfiguration: Exceeds expectations

Care of Magical Creatures: Exceeds expectations

Divination: Exceeds expectations

Him? Outstanding in Potions? He shook his head in disbelief. But then, he must admit he did find that subject quite fascinating once it was taught by someone who did not hate him and it had become one of his favorite subjects over the year. The fact that a certain Nicolas Flamel, who was a great potions master himself, was determined to make Harry saw how wonderful the subject was only made Harry's interest in Potions deepened. Potions could do many things that wand magic could never do. For instance, what better method to make someone tell the truth other than using Veritaserum?

Harry found himself smiling at Nicolas' word. How nice it was to know someone was actually proud of him.

The Defense lesson that afternoon was a total disaster and Harry's good mood was quickly transformed into anger and annoyance.

'Understanding the principles underlying defensive magic? Learning to recognize situations in which defensive magic can legally be use? Placing the use of defensive magic in a context for practical use? What's all these rubbish?' thought Harry, staring at the blackboard. 'So the Ministry decided we do not need to learn how to use defensive magic at all? I should have known... of course they would do anything to deny the obvious fact.'

After a few minutes of reading silently, someone finally decided to voice out their question.

"I've got a query about your course aims," said Hermione.

And soon enough, Ron, Dean, Parvati and Harry himself entered the debate while some others were still raising their hand, waiting to be addressed impatiently. Harry could see nearly all of the students in the class were not happy with what Umbridge had said and doubted

the effectiveness of her "teaching method". Most of them, Harry mused, were that concern only because of their OWLs; only a few of them, namely Harry, Ron, Hermione and perhaps Neville, truly understood why learning how to defense themselves was so important in a time like this.

"And what good is theory going to be in the real world?" said Harry loudly, his eyes flashing dangerously.

"This is school, Mr. Potter, not the real world," said Umbridge softly.

"So we're not supposed to be prepared for what's waiting for us out there?" Harry countered.

"There is nothing waiting out there, Mr. Potter."

Harry was about to retort, when he suddenly realized he was going to regret whatever he was going to say. He bit his tongue and forced himself to calm down. He had gone too far, and continued to argue with Umbridge would do him no good. The Ministry had stated clearly that they didn't believe a word Harry had said, so it was useless for him to argue with Umbridge. Harry might get a week of detention after announcing the truth once again, and nothing would change after that, Umbridge and the other students would still not believe him. No, that was not a wise move; it would do him no good at all.

"But you- know- who is out there somewhere!" Ron spoke up from beside him.

"Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley," said Umbridge. "If you really believe the tale that a certain Dark wizard has returned from the dead..."

"He did return. Harry saw him..."

"Ron!" Harry hissed, stopping his friend.

"As I was saying, you have been informed that a certain Dark wizard is at large once again. This is a lie," said Umbridge. "And five more points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley."

Ron's face glowed red from anger. "Harry is not..."

"That's enough, Ron!" said Harry quietly, barely concealing his own anger. He pulled Ron's sleeve and stopped him from angering the Ministry officer any further.

Umbridge glanced from Ron to Harry, then turned back to address the whole class, "Now, class, go one and read the first chapter."

Harry was glad that Ron did not argue any further, as his own anger had already reached a dangerous level; he wasn't sure how much longer he could hold himself back.

"Why did you stop me, Harry?" Ron asked once they were back to the common room.

Harry sighed. "Think about it. We all know where Umbridge comes from and why she's here. There is no use arguing with her, it would only earn you weeks of detention."

Ron thought for a while. "But we need to do something," he said eventually. "Imagine that, she don't even plan to teach use how to defend ourselves."

"I can't believe Professor Dumbledore would hire someone let her. And in our OWLs year no less," said Hermione. "We need more then theory if we are to pass our OWLs and of course, defend ourselves against You- Know- Who."

Against Voldemort? Every thought about Tom hit back at Harry with full force. Fight against him? Could Harry do that? After all he'd been trough? He really needed to talk to Nicolas, as soon as possible; otherwise he would surely drive himself insane before the first Hogsmeade weekend.

"Harry?" Hermione's voice brought him back to reality.

"Wh... what?" asked Harry.

"I was saying we should organize a defense group," said Hermione. "What do you think?"

Defense group? That was a nice idea. Everyone needed to be able to protect themselves, especially in the dark time they were in.

Harry nodded. "That's a good idea, thought we need to plan carefully, we will be in great trouble if Umbridge find out," he said. "But who will be teaching us?"

Both Hermione and Ron looked pointedly at him.

Harry winced. "What? You are expecting me to teach?"

"But you are the one who are most skilled in defense, Harry. Think about the Triwizard Tournament, and the Patronus Charm, you're the only one who can do it," Hermione pointed out.

Harry rubbed his forehead. "I'll need to think about it."

The first week of school was nearly as worse as a summer with the Dursleys and Harry was glad that it was finally Sunday. Ron was busy with his homework and Hermione was studying in her usual spot in the common room. Harry was glad that he had already finished his fifth year once, so he didn't need to worry about his schoolwork and could focus on other things. He managed to use the excuse that he needed to do some research for the defense group and slipped pass from his friends' supervising gaze.

Harry was going to visit Nicolas today, regardless of what the old wizard said. He simply couldn't stand waiting until the first Hogsmeade weekend. He was not sure if talking to Nicolas could help him or not, but at least he could voice out all the disturbing thoughts that was bottled inside him. Beside Sirius, Nicolas was the only wizard that Harry trusted enough to share all his thoughts.

Nicolas had said that the portkey could work anywhere, even in Hogwarts; so the only thing Harry needed to do was to find a place where no one could find him and activated the portkey. And a place where no one could find him could only mean...

Harry entered the room of requirement and found himself standing alone at the edge of a forest. The forest, of course, was familiar to him. After all, he had spent hours in here before, though not alone, he was accompanied by Tom every time he was here.

He took out the red stone from his pocket and took a deep breath.

"Vado."

Harry fell heavily onto the floor; the same spot he fell onto that day, he mused. He heard footsteps approaching him and found himself facing an amused Nicolas Flamel.

Nicolas was much older than the last time Harry saw him, but well, that was fifty years ago. Despite the age, Nicolas' eyes were twinklng, much like Dumbledore's.

"Ah, welcome, Alex," the old wizard greeted warmly. "Or shall I say Harry?"

Harry greeted him and sad smile he added quietly, "I would rather be Alex. It's so hard to be Harry Potter."

Nicolas smile sadly and gestured him into the house.

Nicolas' house hadn't change much since his last visit. The only different was the bright red stone on top of the glass cabinet was no longer here.

"The Sorcerer's Stone..." Harry started.

"It's alright. Immortality is not the most important thing of life, Harry. Death is but the next great adventure," said Nicolas.

Harry smiled. "I remembered Dumbledore saying the same thing in my first year."

Nicolas laughed. "Yes, I can imagine him saying that."

Harry suddenly remembered something Dumbledore said. "Your wife..."

"Perenelle died a few months ago," said Nicolas simply.

"Er... sorry," Harry said softly, lowering his gaze.

"Don't be," Nicolas said. "Death has nothing to be afraid of; always remember that."

Harry looked up and nodded.

Nicolas smiled. "You've never met her, right? I remember she was going on a mission for the order at that time."

"Order?" said Harry, startled. "The Order of the Phoenix?"

Nicolas nodded. "The order was set up a long time ago, though at that time it was against Grindelwald, not Voldemort."

Harry looked down at the mention of Voldemort.

Nicolas placed his hand on Harry's shoulder and directed him to a chair. "There's much we have to talk about. Come and take a sit."

Nicolas gestured Harry to sit down on an arm chair and sat himself on the opposite one.

"Lemon Drop?" asked the old man.

Harry couldn't help but chuckled. No wonder Nicolas and Dumbledore were friends.

"No thanks."

Nicolas threw the candy into his mouth before looking back at Harry.

Harry spoke up first. "I'm sorry. I know I should wait until the next Hogsmeade weekend and not sneaking out of school like that, but..."

"It's alright," said Nicolas. "Actually, I expect you to come even sooner."

Harry blinked; he didn't expect this answer.

Nicolas laughed. "You're James Potter's son. And James Potter was not a patient man, from what I've heard."

"You know my father?"

Nicolas shook his head. "No. But I've heard a lot about him from Albus. And a lot about you too."

"How long have you known I am Alex?" asked Harry.

"At the first time I saw you on the newspaper. That is, when you were one. I recognized your scar immediately. But since I am the only one who knew what 'Alex' actually looked like, it is not likely that anyone else could have recognized you." Nicolas paused for a moment and continued more seriously, "I guess you are here to talk about Tom Riddle, am I right?"

Harry nodded. "I don't know what to do," he said softly.

"I can understand." Nicolas looked thoughtful for a while. "I see you haven't told anyone about your trip yet; you didn't even tell Albus," he pointed out.

Harry looked down at the ground and started to tell Nicolas about Dumbledore's attitude over the summer.

"I believe Albus has his reason for not telling you about the connection. Try to talk to him. I am sure he can understand."

"I don't think he can judge fairly," said Harry. "I mean, Tom... Voldemort is his enemy, and it didn't seem right to tell him I am... I was Tom Riddle's friend."

"You are Tom Riddle's friend, Harry," said Nicolas firmly. "Albus is a wise man, I am sure he can help you. But tell him or not is your own decision. Either way, you can always come here and I will try my best to help you."

"Thank you, Nicolas," said Harry softly. "I really need someone to talk to."

"You are confused." Nicolas observed.

Harry nodded slowly. "I don't know what to do. I always considered Voldemort as my enemy, but..." He sighed. "I don't know what to think of him anymore. If I didn't go back in time, everything will be alright, then..."

"Then you can continue to hate him without any hesitation?" Nicolas suggested.

Harry paused for a while and finally nodded, defeated.

"Is that really what you want?" Nicolas asked quietly. "Do you really regret befriending Tom Riddle?"

Harry thought about the time he spent with Tom and all the experiences they shared. After a long silence, he whispered, "No." He looked up at Nicolas. "But what if I have done more? If I have done more, maybe Tom would not become what he is now; maybe Voldemort would not even exist."

"There's no such thing called 'what if'. What's done is done. We can only focus on the future, not dwelling on the past. Your journey to the past has created a... very interesting situation. I believe you should have worked out why you could survive that killing curse by now."

Harry looked up at the statement, confused. "I thought that was my mother..."

"Part of it is because of your mother's sacrifice. But your mother was not the only one who sacrificed her life for her children, so why only you can survive?"

"I've never thought of that..." Harry said thoughtfully.

"It is because of Tom Riddle," said Nicolas. "Tell me, Harry, other than power, what do you need for a killing curse to work?"

Harry didn't see what Nicolas was getting at, but answered nonetheless. "Er... the intention?"

"Exactly," said the old wizard. "Voldemort has every intention to kill you, as Harry Potter, so a fatal killing curse shot out from his wand and hit you. But then, he had no intention to kill you, as Alex, at all. So a strange thing happened; the curse rebounded and hit Voldemort himself with full force."

Harry gasped. "So... you mean the curse didn't work because Tom didn't want to kill 'Alex'?"

Nicolas nodded. "As I said, you are Tom Riddle's friend. Alex Salutor is always Tom Riddle's friend," he said. "As for whether you still consider Tom Riddle as your friend or not, you must judge it yourself. I'm sure you've got the answer, even though you refused to admit it."

Harry just sat there in silence, musing on Nicolas' word.

"Just give yourself some time, child," said Nicolas. "I know it is hard for you, after all Voldemort has done. And that prophecy would only make it harder for you."

"Prophecy?" Harry looked up sharply.

Nicolas looked shocked and he paled visibly. "You don't know?" he said weakly.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "What prophecy, Nicolas?" he asked cautiously. "What should I know?"

A/N: Thanks for the reviews!

Here are some answers to your questions:

schneeleopard: In this story, the setting in Harry's fifth year is the same as the cannon. That is, same professors, same prophecy and so on. As for the events, some of the main events in book five will still happen. Though I will only include those events that could happen. That is, this Harry would not be stupid enough to argue with Umbridge and therefore the event "Detention with Umbridge" wouldn't happen. But from the next chapter onwards, it will be impossible for the plot to follow the story line of book five...

As for Nicolas Flamel, Dumbledore said in book one that "they have enough Elixir to set their affairs in order", so he could still be alive.

mysticXesperanza: I will try to update at least once a month. But with all the schoolwork and activities, I can't guarantee anything.

Chapter 3: Friend or Foe?

Harry was immediately questioned by his friends as he went back to the common room just before dinner.

"Harry! Where've you been?" asked Hermione, placing her hands on her lap.

"Library," Harry said flatly.

Hermione eyed him suspiciously. "But you've been out for hours," she said.

Harry sighed. "I'm tired, Hermione, please leave me alone."

"Harry!" Hermione yelled behind him as he went up the stair to his dorm.

Harry lay on his bad, staring at the ceiling and thinking deeply. He was terribly wrong by assuming the meeting with Nicolas would make him feel batter. If any, the meeting only made him much more miserable and lost. The worst part of the whole meeting was the moment Nicolas revealed the prophecy to him...

"What prophecy, Nicolas?" Harry pressed.

"It is not my place to tell, child," said the old man uneasily. "Albus must have good reasons for not telling you. You should trust him, Harry."

"I don't care about his reasons!" Harry snapped. "The prophecy is about me, right? Then why shouldn't I know about it?"

Nicolas knew how stubborn Harry could be, especially when he was pissed off. He sighed. "I still think you should talk to Albus."

Harry took a deep breath to control his temper. Then he said quietly, "Please, Nicolas, I'm fed up with not knowing anything."

After a long pause, Nicolas finally said, "Fine. I suppose you have to right to know, though I'm not looking forward to seeing Albus' reaction once he knows."

"Then he's not going to know," Harry cut in casually.

Nicolas eyed him with amusement, then shifted his gaze to the Gryffindor badge on Harry's robe. "I can see why the hat put you in Slytherin."

"Er... should I take it as a compliment or what?" said Harry, reddening slightly.

Nicolas chuckled before becoming serious again. "It's not going to be pleasant for you," he said, "especially with your relationship with Tom Riddle."

Harry nodded grimly, half expecting something like this, and asked Nicolas to continued.

"Albus is the one who heard the prophecy was it was told by the seer. Trelawney... yes, I think that's her name."

Harry's eyes widened at that. 'Trelawney? I hope she's not that Trelawney... But then, hasn't Dumbledore said she did make another prophecy before the one about Wormtail?' he thought. He didn't voice it out though, as he didn't want to interrupt Nicolas.

"Albus kept it a secret and only a few was told about it." Nicolas took a deep breath. "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches; born to those who have thrice defied him; born as the seventh month dies; and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal; but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not and..." he paused and looked up at Harry, whose expression was unreadable. He gave Harry a sad look before speaking the last sentence softly, "and either

must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives."

Harry rested his head on his knees. He had been sitting on the chair in that position for quite some time now, and he hadn't said anything since he heard of the prophecy.

"Harry..." Nicolas placed his hand gently on Harry's shoulder.

"Why... why is it always me?" he chocked without looking up.

"You are not facing this alone, child," said Nicolas softly.

"But at the end, I will still be alone. It's either Tom or me, isn't it? If I win, the light side will win; if Tom wins, the dark side will win and I will die," said Harry flatly. After a long silence, he looked up at Nicolas and said softly, "I can't do it, Nicolas. I can't... I know I can never kill Tom, no matter what he's done. I... damn it!" He gritted his teeth. "What should I do?"

"Don't let the prophecy and others' expectation control you, Harry. Do as you wish." He held Harry's right hand by his waist and placed it on Harry's chest, just where his heart should be. "Do you hear it? You don't need to ask me what you should do, for you've already got the answer. Just do what your heart tells you."

"Just do what my heart tells me?" Harry muttered to himself.

What did he want anyway?

You are Tom Riddle's friend. Alex Salutor is always Tom Riddle's friend.

Whether you still consider Tom Riddle as your friend or not, you must judge it yourself.

I'm sure you've got the answer, even though you refused to admit it.

Harry absentmindedly took out his necklace which he hid underneath his shirt and stared at the stone doubtfully.

I can't... I know I can never kill Tom, no matter what he's done.

He clenched the stone tightly, feeling the strong protective power flowed trough his body.

Then Harry knew the answer. Tom was his friend, not his foe. Even if Tom had forgotten about him long ago, even if Tom was the one who killed his parents, he knew he still believed that the boy he once knew was still hidden somewhere in Voldemort; he still believed that deep down in the Dark Lord's heart, there was light.

He remembered what he once said to Tom:

But that's what friends are for: to pull each other into trouble and to help each other out of it.

No matter what, I will find a way to get to you.

I promise.

Yes, now he knew what he should do. He had once promised Tom that he would find a way get to him, and he was going to keep that promise. There was no way he would abandon Tom again. No matter what, he would find a way to bring out that forgotten light in Tom's heart. He still didn't know how he could do it, but one thing was for sure: he needed to talk to Tom. And in order to do that, he needed a certain skill...

"Hey, where've you been, Harry?" asked Ron as Harry approached the Gryffindor table.

Harry shrugged. "Library."

"Again?" Ron shook his head. "You're starting to act like Hermione, mate."

"Well, I need to study harder for OWLs," Harry lied.

Ron groaned, though Hermione seemed to be quite glad that Harry was starting to take his study serious.

It's been three days after Harry's talk with Nicolas. The revelation of the prophecy had forced Harry to make up his mind and, strangely, he had been feeling better since then. The situation had not improved at all, if not worsened, but now he knew clearly what he should do and no longer felt so... lost, as he did for the last month.

Harry's relationship with his friends had improved as well. Ron and Hermione seemed to be glad that Harry had finally returned to his "normal" self and stopped bombarding him with those endless questions about his well being, for which Harry was really glad. He knew the two of them were aware of his change. He had been acting so differently after that trip and there was no way that Ron and Hermione wouldn't notice. But for now, they seemed to be satisfied as long as Harry stopped distancing himself from them.

Though Harry knew things would never be the same between him and the other two Gryffindors. It was becoming more and more obvious to him that he no longer fit in Gryffindor. It was as if a certain part of him had awakened after he spent a year in the serpent house. And Harry couldn't help but pondered on what the others might think if he told them their "Gryffiindor Golden Boy" thought he should be a Slytherin rather than a Gryffindor.

Harry grimaced as he thought of the title "Gryffindor Golden Boy". Oh, how he hated Dumbledore's manipulation. Dumbledore deliberately kept everything from him and used him as his pawn to kill Voldemort. No, he was not going to do follow what the old man said. Harry had respected him, but Dumbledore had broken his trust. Now, he was going to follow his own path, a path that was not simple, but for Harry, that was the right road.

"So, Harry, have you decided yet? Will you be the leader of the defense club?" whispered Hermione from beside him.

"What? Oh, the defense club... yes, I will do it," replied Harry.

The defense club was the second thing that was bothering Harry. He had considered refusing the offer before, since he was not sure if he could manage to teach. Besides, he had enough things to worry about already. But then, an idea hit him suddenly and the Slytherin part of him told him that he should accept the offer.

Hermione smiled. "Really? That was great, Harry!" she said. "We will try to tell as much people as possible. Of course, only those who are trust worthy."

"No Slytherins, that's for sure," said Ron, staring at Malfoy, who was observing them with narrowed eyes from the Slytherin table.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Well," he said slowly, "if I am the leader, I guess I will have the right to invite anyone to join, am I right?"

"Of course." Hermione frowned. "Is there anyone specific that you want to invite?"

Harry nodded. "If I am to teach, I guess I'd need someone to help," he said simply and refused to say anything more.

And when a certain blonde left the great hall after breakfast, Harry quickly excused himself and slipped out of the hall after his "target".

"Malfoy! Hey, Malfoy!" Harry ran after the blonde, who was obviously on his way to the dungeons. Harry was quite surprised to find Malfoy alone, without his bodyguards around.

Malfoy turned and narrowed his eyes. "What, Scarface?"

Harry ignored the name. "We... er... Hermione, Ron and me was planning to organize a defense club, since we all saw it necessary, especially... in a time like this," he said tentatively.

Malfoy looked surprised. But Harry was not sure if it was because of the daring attempt of organizing a defense club under the watchful eyes of Umbridge or whether it was because his source of information was Harry Potter.

"Why are you telling me this?" he said, still watching Harry's every move closely.

"Because I want you to join us," Harry replied. "Not as a member though, as a teacher."

"What?" Now Malfoy was not staring at him suspiciously, he was staring at him as if Harry was insane.

Harry sighed. He knew it was not easy. "Hermione said we need someone who actually knew the subject to teach and she asked me. But I'm sure I can't do it well alone, I need some help."

"And you come and ask me to help you?" asked Malfoy, saying that as if it was the most ridiculous joke he'd ever heard.

"We can all benefit from your knowledge of the dark arts," said Harry quietly.

Mafoy narrow his eyes. "And how do you know about that, Potter? And why would the golden boy of Gryffindor wants that knowledge?" he asked with a dangerous tone.

"Dark magic are not evil; it's the intention that makes it evil. I don't have any problem with you using dark arts, Malfoy," said Harry coolly. "As for your knowledge, if you take the quality of our previous defense professors into account, you would find that some students in this school nearly didn't have any experience of facing the dark arts. How can they defense themselves properly if they don't know what they will be facing? How can they conjure a shield properly without testing it with dark magic? Of course we will need your skill, Malfoy.

Besides, you're a skilled dueler; you should know how to defense yourself well."

Malfoy looked surprised that Harry was actually complimenting him. "And why do you think I will join you? I may report this to Umbridge, as I'm sure she would be very... interested in it."

"You won't," said Harry firmly. In truth, Harry was not sure if he could trust Malfoy with this information, but he knew that was a risk he should take. "Think about it, Malfoy," he continued, "you can get every information you want about, as far as I know, the only resistance force of students against To... Voldemort."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Potter," Malfoy hissed.

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about, Malfoy, we both know what happened at the end of my forth year." Malfoy opened his mouth to say something, but Harry didn't give him the chance. "I don't know which side you will choose, or rather, which side you have chosen. But either way, you will be benefited by joining us. I know Slytherins would not show others their abilities that easily, so see it as a fair trade. If you join us, you will need to show us your knowledge. In turn, you can gain information and perhaps learn some new skills from your enemy."

Malfoy looked stunned after Harry's speech but managed to regain himself seconds later. "The same goes for you, I assume? What you will gain I if join that club of yours," he said slowly.

Harry smirked. "Of course."

Malfoy looked thoughtful.

"You don't need to answer me right away, just tell me when you make your decision," said Harry.

Harry turned around and started to walk away when a quiet voice stop him.

"How very Slytherin of you, Potter."

Harry blinked and grinned mischievously. He looked over his shoulder. "Why, thank you, Malfoy," he said to the bewildered blonde before walking away.

Chapter 4: The Three Broomsticks

Red…

Red…

Harry groaned and collapsed onto the ground.

He was in his "forest", which, of course, was actually the Room of the Requirement. He was currently lying in the middle of the clearing, panting heavily. A few feet on the ground before him was a greenish stone. That was the stone given to him by Nicolas a year before. It was used to test one's magic. It would glow red if the spell it was hit with worked, otherwise it would remain green in colour.

Harry had been practicing with it for more than two weeks before the stone started to give him some respond. He knew that was an advance spell, and that it would be really hard for someone to learn it without an instructor. Nevertheless, after weeks of practice, he finally was able to make that stone glow bright red every time. Though he was exhausted after each practice…

Harry rubbed the sweat off his forehead. That spell was really consuming!

Sighing, Harry slowly crawled up from the ground and pointed his wand at the stone. Taking a deep breath, he performed the spell once again.

"Legilimens!"

The stone glowed bright red again. Good.

Now it was time to go on to the next stage.

While Harry was practicing Legilimency, his friends were rapidly organizing the first meeting of their secret defense club. And by the

time of the first Hogsmeade weekend, all possible members of the club had been informed.

A day before the first Hogsmeade weekend, Harry sent an "invitation card" to the annoyed Draco Malfoy in the Slytherin table. He still didn't know whether the Slytherin had decided to join, but he told him the time and place of the first meeting nevertheless.

Harry was alone in the library when Malfoy found him after the last lesson of that day.

"Malfoy." Harry looked up and greeted the Slytherin as he approached.

"What's the meaning of this, Potter." Malfoy took out the letter he had gotten that morning.

"Oh, that's the time of the first meeting," Harry answered with an innocent look on his face.

Malfoy snorted. "You know very well what I mean!"

Harry smirked. "Well, since you didn't give me any reply, I figured I'd just tell you when the first meeting was, in case you decided to join us."

Malfoy glared at him. "I've never-"

"So, will you come?" asked Harry, ignoring what the blonde was going to say.

"What make you think I'd teach those stupid mudblood friends of yours?" asked the blonde.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "You will not insult my friends, Malfoy," he said in a cold voice.

Malfoy met Harry's glare, both of them refusing to avert their gaze first. Finally, Harry sighed and looked away.

"So, will you join us?" he asked.

Malfoy paused for a while and replied, "I will only show my magic if necessary."

Harry nodded, agreeing.

"I can quit whenever I like," Malfoy continued.

Harry smirked. Trust a Slytherin to state something like that.

"All right, as long as you keep the existence of the group a secret," he said.

"Fine then," said Malfoy, satisfied.

"One thing though, Malfoy, if you are going to join, promise not to insult my friends again. No name calling and don't deliberately anger them," said Harry.

Malfoy stared at him and sighed. "All right," he said, "but don't expect me to be friendly to them."

Harry chuckled. "Who would expect that from you?"

Malfoy smirked. "Potter, are you really planning to hold the meeting at Hog's Head of all places?"

Harry nodded. "Why?" he asked.

The blonde rolled his eyes. "Even the Three Broomsticks would be safer than Hog's Head if we don't want to be overheard!"

And so they started their first-ever civil discussion.

"WHAT?" Ron exploded.

"I said," said Harry calmly, "Malfoy here is going to-"

"You told this… this… ferret about the defense club and asked him to JOIN?"

"To teach, Weasel," Malfoy injected coolly.

"Malfoy!" Harry shot Malfoy a disprove glare.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "You can always leave if you want, Weasley."

Ron glared at him.

Harry sighed. To make matter worse, Hermione decided to enter the conversation.

"Harry, are you sure…" said Hermione, staring at Malfoy with uncertainty.

"He can be trusted, Hermione." Harry saw Malfoy widened his eyes at this. He continued firmly, "He is not his father."

"He is a bloody Death Eater!" yelled Ron.

"Ron!" Hermione warned him as she saw several customers in the Three Broomsticks had turned to look at them.

"Are you sure, Ron?" asked Harry. Before Ron could reply, he continued, "For all I know, he is skilled at defense and our group will benefit from him."

"But-"

"You hardy know him, Ron, you have no right to judge him." Harry sighed. "At least give him the benefit of the doubt, alright?"

Ron shut up and narrowed his eyes at Malfoy, who held his head up in an arrogant way.

Harry rolled his eyes at the pair's antics. He turned to the others, who had been watching the entire exchange. Some of them looked

amused and curious while some looked puzzled at the presence of Draco Malfoy.

"Er…" Harry started, gaining the others' attention, "as you can see, Hermione here," Hermione reddened a bit, "got the idea that we need to learn Defense Against the Dark Arts properly. What Umbridge taught us was totally useless. So she suggested organizing a defense club, for our own safety or simply for passing the exam."

"For our own safety?" Zacharias Smith asked sharply.

Harry nodded grimly. "Voldemort is back. We need to know how to protect ourselves in order to survive." Malfoy narrowed his eyes at the statement. Harry noticed that and added softly, "No matter which side we are on."

"Do you have proof?" Smith narrowed his eyes. "That He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back?"

"No," said Harry firmly, surprising everyone, "I have no proof that could convince you." He sighed. "I am tired of repeating again and again what has happened. Voldemort is back, I saw it with my own eyes. If you choose to believe something that would make you feel better, so be it. But the sooner you accept the fact and prepare yourself, the greater chance you will have to survive."

Everyone was either surprised or frightened after Harry's speech.

"I don't believe you," said Smith quietly.

"Leave then," said a cold voice before Harry could reply.

Harry turned to see it was Malfoy who had spoken.

"If you have any problems, then leave," said the blonde. "I don't want to be in the same group as a bunch of idiots who can not distinguish between truths or lies anyway."

There were no further arguments after that, and despite the protests, no one left at the end.

Harry shot Malfoy an amused look, and the blonde raised his eyebrows in respond.

Harry chuckled and shook his head.

He turned to the others and continued cheerfully, "For those who still want to join, please sign you name here." He pulled out a parchment from his pocket and laid it on the table. "This is a magical contract. After you sign it, you can't tell anyone about this group. Everything should be kept secret, otherwise that would be considered as breaking the contract."

"What will happen if we break the contract?" someone in the group asked.

Harry smirked. He and Hermione had worked together to make the contract, and the consequences of breaking it were not at all pleasant.

"Believe me, you don't want to find out," said Harry slyly. He turned and wrote his name on the parchment.

"How on earth did you find this place, Potter?" asked Malfoy, looking around the room.

Harry grinned. They were in a secret room down in the dungeons, the same room where Tom hid from 'Alex' after the Chamber incident. The room was a small conference room, with a long table and several chairs around it.

"A friend of mine told me," Harry answered. 'At least, I hope he is still my friend,' he thought grimly.

Malfoy snorted. "Searching for secret rooms in the dungeons? It seems you Gryffindors are more reckless than I thought."

Harry raised an eyebrow, but said nothing about the identity of that 'reckless Gryffindor' who found the room.

"So," he said, placing several defense books on the table, "what are we going to do in the first meeting?"

One day after the meeting in the Three Broomsticks, the two 'leaders' of the defense club had decided to meet each other after dinner to discuss what they were going to do in the meetings. As it was way too suspicious for the two of them to appear and actually have a civil conversation in the library, or rather, any public places, Harry had suggested using this secret room. Harry was not ready to share the secret of the Room of Requirement to anyone at the moment.

"We need to find out what they could do before starting anything new," said Malfoy.

Harry knew Malfoy could care less about what the others could do. The blonde wanted to test Harry's ability and that was obvious, to any Slytherin at least.

"So, dueling then?" he asked, knowing it was what Malfoy was suggesting.

Malfoy seemed surprised that Harry voiced out exactly what he was thinking, though he concealed it well.

He smirked. "Why, Potter, it seems we can actually work together after all."

Harry smirked back.

Severus was walking back to his personal chamber after gathering several ingredients from a storeroom in a rather remote part of the dungeons. He stopped abruptly as he heard voices coming from the room next to him. To say he was surprised was an understatement, as even he himself rarely came this deep into the dungeons. He would not be here had it not been for some of the darker ingredients that were needed for those dark potions requested by the Dark Lord.

He took out his wand, cast a silencing charm on himself, and crept closer to the door. He heard two voices coming from the room, and the two owners of the voices obviously were having some kind of argument.

"Expelliarmus?"

Severus immediately recognized that voice as Draco Malfoy's, but who was he talking to? And why was he here in the first place?

"Honestly, everyone knows this spell! Is that all you can think of?" Draco continued.

"That particular spell saved my life many times before. We'd better start from something easier before we move on to the harder ones."

Severus' eyes widened at the voice. Potter? What was he doing in his dungeons? And with none other than Draco Malfoy no less!

Determined to find out what was happening, he cautiously opened the door. Inside the dark room, he saw someone had pushed the ingredient shelf aside, revealing a door behind it. Pondering how anyone could find a room in a place like that, he pushed the door open to find Draco Malfoy sitting alone in the room.

Draco looked up from the book he had been reading when Severus entered the room. His eyes widened before greeting him with a smile.

"Hi, Uncle Severus," his godson said.

Severus frowned. "What are you doing here, Draco?"

"Reading," Draco answered, lifting the book in his hand for him to see. "The common room is too noisy. And Goyle and Crabbe kept disturbing me there."

Being a skilled Legilimens, Severus immediately knew the boy was lying. He knew Draco had no knowledge of Occlumency at all. Lucius had made sure of that to prevent his son from lying to him, he thought with distaste.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts?" he asked, eyeing the book in the boy's hand.

"Oh, this…" Draco started. Severus could tell that the young Malfoy was thinking of an excuse. "Well, my father won't be happy if I fail in my OWLs, right? Even if it is a useless subject."

Severus raised his eyebrows, stating he did not believe anything the boy had just said. Before he could say anything else, he felt severe pain coming from his left forearm, or more specifically, the Dark Mark. He clenched his fist and gritted his teeth in pain.

"Uncle Severus? Are you alright?" asked Draco, concerned.

Severus nodded tightly. "We'll talk later, Draco," he said before turning

on his heel and sweeping out of the room.

Several minutes after Snape ran out, a pale Harry Potter reappeared in the room, an invisibility cloak in his hand. He stared at the open door, knowing exactly what Snape's abrupt behaviour meant. He shifted his gaze to the blonde beside him, who was also staring at the open door, frowning.

"Malfoy?" he asked.

Malfoy turned to face him. Harry noticed the blonde had paled visibly, which he couldn't understand why. Unless…

"We were lucky this time, though I'm sure he was suspecting something," said Malfoy. He sneered. :I can't believe both of us have forgotten to place a silencing charm on the room! We didn't even lock the door." He looked at Harry. "But the alarm just now… someone must have put a ward there."

Harry nodded. He thought for a while and said slowly, "I guess that certain friend of mine put it there." Which was quite likely, he mused. He remembered Tom saying he should add a ward in the room since 'Alex' had found him so easily. Of course, Tom had no idea of their connection.

The two boys had been surprised when an alarm rang in the room, warning them someone was invading. Without thinking, Harry had hid himself under the invisibility cloak which he had used to sneak into the dungeons earlier while Malfoy had quickly buried himself under the book nearest to him.

"Anyway," said Harry, "let's get out of here now."

"Albus, the Dark Lord wants to find out what the prophecy is about."

Albus Dumbledore sighed. "He will try to trick Harry into getting it. Only Harry and the Dark Lord himself can remove the prophecy from the shelf without damaging the orb."

Severus sneered at the mention of Potter's name. He knew all about that prophecy, of course; he was actually one of the few that knew of the whole content. It was this cursed prophecy that had taken what little he had left away from him... forever.

"Voldemort must not get the prophecy, Severus," said the old wizard.

Voldemort. Severus never figured out how Albus did that. The Dark Lord had placed a curse on all of his followers by using the Dark Mark. All Death Eaters were forbidden to call their master "Voldemort", or they would suffer from severe pain coming from the Dark Mark. To make it worse, it would cause the same effect when they heard someone saying that name. The Dark Lord seemed to think that if the population of the wizarding world were afraid to say the name "Voldemort", then not even his own Death Eaters should be allowed to call him that. Though, no matter how many times Albus called him by that name, Severus' Dark Mark gave no response. Every time

Severus asked him about that, that annoying old man would only said, "Oh, several wards would do the trick, my dear boy."

"I know," he answered tightly.

"Severus, about what I asked earlier…" Albus started.

Severus groaned. He knew exactly what the headmaster wanted him to do.

"The boy hates me, Albus, and I must say the feeling is mutual," he protested.

"I know what you feel about James, but Harry is not…" Severus held up his hand to stop the headmaster from going any further.

"From what I've seen, that boy is exactly the same as his father." Severus sighed, knowing it was useless to argue with Albus. He knew he could never change the perfect image of the Boy-Who-Lived in Albus' mind, no matter what the boy had done. Instead, he told Albus something that had been disturbing him. "Do you know your precious golden boy has been acting strangely?"

Albus sighed. "Severus, I've had enough complaints about Harry from you already."

"No, it's not the same. The boy was somehow… different," he said. "Do you know he's been associating with Draco?"

"Young Mr. Malfoy?" said Albus. Severus could tell he was surprised at the statement.

"Yes," said Severus, "I'm sure that it was Potter talking with Draco in the dungeons just now." He smirked. "Surprised to hear your Gryffindor golden boy associating with a Slytherin?"

Albus looked at him disapprovingly. "I'm worried about him, Severus, but I can't risk being so close to him. I would have taught him myself, but I can't. Please, Severus."

Severus rubbed his temple. He knew there was no way he could refuse.

"Fine then, but don't expect too much," he finally said. He nodded to the smiling headmaster and stood to leave the office. Upon reaching the doorknob, though, he thought of something and turned around. "I need to borrow your Pensieve, Albus."

A/N: I've found a beta! Thanks, Irihi Safaia. And thanks for all the reviewers.

Many of you have asked me when Tom would come in. He'd come in soon, I promise. Well, as soon as Harry finds a way to talk to him. I can't wait to write the part when the two of them meet, but... well, you'll have to wait and see. Oh, and don't forget to review!

Chapter 5: The Battle of Mind

Legilimency

In order to learn Legilimency, you should first master Occlumency and be able to guard your mind instinctively.

Legilimency involves emotion control, and thus is classified as Dark Magic. It is one of the few magic that can be performed without using a wand. Other examples of this kind of magic are Apparation, Occlumency and Animagus Transformaion. Performing Legilimency requires a large amount of magical power and more so if the spell is performed wandlessly. A failed attempt to perform Legilimency might result in forever being trapped in another wizard's mind, insanity, or death.

Learning Legilimency involves two stages. The first stage is performing Legilimency with the incantation and a wand. It can be preformed like any normal spell, though you have to clear you mind and concentrate while doing so. The incantation is "Legilimens".

The nest stage is to perform Legilimency with your mind only. This part is much harder than the first stage. You must focus on your victim and only your victim. The spell is more likely to succeed if you have eye contact or physical contact with your victim. Concentrate and, through the contact point, try to connect yourself with your victim. It would be much easier to invade unguarded minds like Muggles or untrained wizards. If your victim knows Occlumency, you need to break through the mental barrier before invading into your victim's mind. One thing you should be aware of is that wizards who are skilled in Occlumency can nearly always detect the invasion of their mind when you use Legilimency on them.

Other than invading another's mind, Legilimency can help to deceive your enemy when you are subjected to Legilimency. It allows you to control your thoughts and to choose which memory you want you enemy to view.

Harry looked up from the book. He had gone through the first stage, and it was time for him to practice his skill wandlessly. He needed a

victim. And the image of a certain professor immediately came to his mind. He might as well use his skill to confirm his suspicion.

Harry smiled slyly. This was going to be fun.

"What is this place?" asked Ron.

"A secret room," Harry answered. "It should be safe after adding a few wards."

"Found by that friend of yours again?" said Malfoy.

Harry smiled weakly. "He's an expert in finding hiding places."

Ron and Hermione looked at him.

"Who, Harry?" asked Ron.

"I thought it's one of you Gryffindors." Malfoy raised his eyebrows at Harry and smirked. "What, Potter? Don't want to share your secret rooms with your friends? What else are you hiding from them?"

Ron looked hurt. "Who found this room, Harry? I don't think this room is on the Marau…"

Hermione coughed, stopping Ron in mid-sentence and successfully preventing the secret of the Marauder's Map from being spilled.

"Snuffles told me, they discovered it after… it was completed," Harry lied, then quickly change the topic. "Anyway, let's get started."

They were in a room with an entrance near the kitchen. The room was large and perfect for dueling. Harry had checked the Marauder's Map and this was the only room besides the one in the dungeons that was not listed on the map. If even the Marauders could not find this place, then it should be safe.

Ron had reacted violently after hearing Harry had had a meeting with Malfoy alone. He had also insisted that he and Hermione would accompany Harry next time, much to Malfoy's annoyance.

"All right, Malfoy and I will work on the wards. Hermione, can you work on those… um… galleons with Ron?"

Hermione nodded. And Ron, still reluctant to leave Harry working alone with Malfoy, nodded after shooting a warning glare at the blonde.

Malfoy rolled his eyes before turning to Harry.

"We'd better set the wards so that only those in the group can come in. Even better if only those who are in the group can see this room," suggested Malfoy.

"The combination of the notice-me-not charm and several wards then," said Harry thoughtfully. "We can use the magical contract to identify ourselves as a member. That way, only those whose names are on the contract can see the door to this room. Besides, since the name would be crossed out if someone breaks the contract, traitors wouldn't be able to see the room."

Malfoy blinked. "That would involve the use some dark magic." He looked at Harry, as if wondering what his reaction would be.

Harry was aware that Malfoy was testing him with this question. He raised an eyebrow at the blonde. "Does that make any difference?" Harry made sure Ron and Hermione were not listening and continued with a smile, "Dark magic it is then. I don't mind using it as long as it's not for hurting others."

Malfoy stared at him with a strange look. "I'd never imagine the Gryffindor golden boy would understand this."

Harry snorted at the nickname. "I understand, Malfoy." he said seriously, then added with a chuckle, "I am not as Gryffindor as everyone thinks. At least, I no longer am," he said the last part quietly

to himself. Though by the look on Malfoy's face, it seemed the Slytherin had heard it too.

"Potter?" asked Malfoy doubtfully.

Harry laughed at the look Malfoy's face. It seemed the fact that Harry Potter saying he was not a perfect Gryffindor had a great impact on the Malfoy heir.

"Come on, let's get to work!" Harry said cheerfully.

On the next day, which happened to be Sunday, all members of the new-founded defense group gathered in the secret room for their first meeting. All members were looking around the room curiously, as none of them knew there was a room here before.

"We need a group name," said Hermione.

"How about Defense Association?" said Cho, "We can shorten it to DA."

"How about DA as in Dumbledore's Army instead?" suggested Ginny.

"Yeah, the Ministry's greatest fear!" Ron agreed.

Both Malfoy and Harry snorted at the same time.

Everyone in the room turned to them.

Hermione frowned. "Harry?"

Harry reddened slightly. "Er… we would put Dumbledore in great trouble if someone finds us out." He made an excuse to cover his mistake, which he found himself doing quite often lately.

Malfoy stared at him, frowning.

"Yes, you're right, we can't put Dumbledore into trouble, though it is not likely that we would be found out," said Cho. "How about Hogwarts' Army then?"

"I'm okay with that," said Harry. He stared at Malfoy, who shrugged.

"Whatever, as long as it's not that old fool's army," he sneered.

Several members glared at him upon hearing the statement, but Malfoy simply ignored them.

"So it is HA then," said Hermione, sensing the tension in the room. She then took out the parchment with all their names on it and wrote "Hogwarts' Army" at the top.

"Harry? What are we going to do today?" she asked.

Harry grinned. "Dueling."

"Stupefy!" shouted Malfoy.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry shouted at the same time.

They both dodged the spell and start flinging curses at each other. Both of them were able to block or evade the other's spells. The dueling continued in the same manner for nearly fifteen minutes until a stray spell obviously from another dueling group in the room flew straight towards Harry. Harry barely evaded the spell thanks to his seeker reflexes but he knew there was no way he could avoid Malfoy's spell- which was flying towards him.

He saw Malfoy's smirking face when the spell was only a few inches before him. Then something unbelievable happened. The spell stopped in mid-air, as if it was stopped by a powerful shield. In the next second, the spell was rebounded back towards Malfoy.

Harry stared with wide eyes. Then he felt power emerging from something under his shirt. He instinctively pulled out the protecting

amulet that had been hanging around his neck constantly for several months. The power was as strong as he first received it from Tom and the amulet was now glowing brightly after blocking the spell.

Malfoy barely dodged his own curse, but those few seconds were enough for Harry to send a disarming curse at him. Malfoy's wand flew out of his hand and Harry caught it swiftly.

Malfoy looked frustrated at losing the duel. "I never thought you would be fast enough to put up a shield."

Harry blinked. So Malfoy thought it was Harry that blocked the curse? Harry didn't feel good for wining the duel. He felt as if he had cheated. But he didn't really want to tell Malfoy about the amulet at the moment. And after all, hadn't Malfoy attacked him when he was dodging the spray spell too?

"You're a good dueler, Malfoy," Harry said instead. "I'm just lucky this time."

Malfoy sneered. "Next time I will win," he said, then jumped back to avoid being hit by another curse flying towards him from somewhere in the room. He rolled his eyes. "Come on, Potter, go and check how they're doing. From what I've seen, they didn't even know where they should fire a curse!"

The first meeting of Hogwarts' Army was quite successful, every member seemed to have enjoyed themselves and learned a thing or two about dueling. So Harry was in a good mood on Monday. Harry was actually looking forward to this day, or rather, looking forward to being in Umbridge's class.

"Today we'll be reading chapter five," said Umbridge.

Harry raised his hand. "Professor?"

Hermione turned to look at him in alert, afraid he would do something stupid.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?" Umbridge turned to face him, so they were now in eye contact.

Harry held her gaze and concentrated. He felt the presence of Umbridge's mind, which was as defenseless as a disarmed wizard. He quickly invaded her mind. Within seconds, he found it…

Umbridge standing in Privet Drive, and standing next to her were two Dememtors. She gave the Dememtors some sort of orders before disappearating from the street.

Harry pulled himself out of his professor's mind and found himself back in the classroom, facing an impatient Umbridge.

'So my suspicion is correct. It was Umbridge who sent the Dememtors!" Harry thought angrily.

"Well, Mr. Potter?" asked Umbridge.

"Sorry, Professor, but I don't really understand what this chapter means," he said as polite as he could manage, doing his best to suppress his anger.

Umbridge frowned and started to move closer to Harry. "Which part of the chapter, Mr. Potter?"

"This part, Professor," said Harry, forcing a smile at the approaching professor while planning his revenge on the said professor inwardly.

"Potter, stay back."

Potter sighed visibly and signaled his friends to leave without him.

Severus locked the door and placed a silencing charm on it.

"Sir?"

He turned to face the boy.

"The headmaster has decided that you need to learn Occlumency," Severus announced.

"WHAT?" Potter yelled with wide eyes.

So Potter did know what Occlumency is? Severus wondered how. After all, Occlumency was considered as dark art and not many knew about it despite its usefulness.

"You heard me, Potter," Severus sneered. "You will be studying Occlumency with me once a week, starting from tonight. Oh, and ten points from Gryffindor for yelling at a professor," he added almost automatically.

Potter bit his lip, obviously trying to prevent himself from saying anything that would cost Gryffindor more marks. Severus raised an eyebrow. Since when did Potter manage to control his temper?

"But I don't need-"

Severus suppressed his urge to roll his eyes. That arrogant brat didn't realize how much danger he could bring to their side through his connection with the Dark Lord.

He glared at the boy. "It is the headmaster's decision. And to tell the truth, I'm not very happy with it, Potter, so you'd better cooperate," he said coldly.

Potter muttered something under his breath. Severus frowned. Did Potter really say, "Damn that meddling old man"?

"Tonight after dinner, my office. If anyone asks, you are having Remedial Potions," he said.

Potter opened his mouth to say something again. Didn't the brat ever know how to shut up?

Severus unlocked the door and said before Potter could say anything. "Now out! I have classes to teach."

Harry sighed. So Dumbledore finally remembered the connection between Harry and Voldemort and wanted Harry to learn Occlumency. No, the old man practically ordered Harry to learn Occlumency, and with Snape of all people!

Harry knew it was very easy for a Legilimens to tell whether someone knew Occlumency or not. If Snape found out Harry was actually quite skilled in Occlumency, there would surely be lots of questioning. There was no way Harry could explain his skill without telling Snape of his time-travel trip, and the fact that Occlumency was dark magic only made matter worse.

So Harry could not block his mind when Snape attacked him. His only hope was to deceive Snape using his newly-learned Legilimency skill. If he could "direct" Snape to see only those memories Harry wanted him to see, Harry might be able to keep his secret.

Harry entered Snape office right after dinner. The first thing that caught his eyes in the office was a pensieve.

'It must contain Snape's worst memory then. I wonder what that is," he thought.

"Well, Potter, you know why you are here," said Snape. "The headmaster asked me to teach you Occlumency. I only hope that you prove to be more adept in it than Potions."

'You have no idea," thought Harry.

Snape went on to give him a brief introduction on Occlumency and told him why he needed to learn it. Then Snape proceeded to the practical part with merely an instruction of "Clear your mind". At that

moment, Harry was really glad to have had Nicolas as his instructor on Occlumency.

"Take out your wand," said Snape.

Harry obeyed, preparing himself for the attack at the same time. He had removed his protecting amulet beforehand. He didn't want to find out what Snape's reaction would be if he found his spell blocked by an unknown force.

"On my count of three." Snape pointed his wand at Harry. "One. Two. Three. Legilimens!"

Harry felt Snape's presence in his mind. He concentrated and focused on the first memory he wanted Snape to see, something Snape had already known…

Harry was flying on the Quidditch pitch…He was really nervous since it was his first Quidditch match… His broom was out of control… He nearly fell… He spotted the snitch and nearly swallowed it in the end… Gryffindor won the match and for the first time in his life he felt pride...

Harry quickly directed Snape to another memory. He didn't want Snape to know how his felt at that time, since by using Legilimency, the caster not only could view the memory, but could feel what the victim felt as well.

Harry and Ron rushed to the girl's toilet… A troll was about to attack Hermione…Ginny's body in the Chamber of Secrets… The boggart in Lupin's class, which turned into a dementor…

Then Harry found himself back in Snape's office.

"You are not trying, Potter. Again!" said Snape. "Legilimens!"

Harry was hovering on top of a dragon… He dived towards the golden egg…

Harry felt Snape pushed further into his mind.

He was in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place… He woke up from a nightmare... He went to the drawing room… A stone was glowing in the dark…

Harry gasped. No, he couldn't let Snape go any further.

"Protego!" he yelled.

A young Lucius Malfoy approached him… They apparated together to a large manor…He was ordered to kill a small muggle girl…Voldemort's cold laughter… Voldemort pointed his wand at his forearm…

Harry found himself trapped inside Snape's mind. What he just saw, was the initiation of Snape to the Death Eater ranks…

A woman screamed… A litter girl crying for her mother… A flash of green light and the crying sound stopped… A dark mark hovering above the muggle village…

A great force pushed Harry out and he found himself once again back to Snape's office. He saw Snape was on the floor, panting.

"Sir? Are you alright?" he asked.

Snape got up and pointed his wand at Harry. "Again, Legilimens!"

He was in Grimmauld Place… He saw Ron and Hermione… He yelled at them for not writing to him… A nightmare… He could not sleep and went to the drawing room…

Harry was desperate to stop Snape from seeing that part of his memory, but he found he could no longer control Snape's 'motion' in his mind. He was exhausted after continuously using Legilimency to view Umbridge's memory that morning and to prevent Snape from viewing his private memory. He had forgotten how consuming Legilimency could be.

Harry saw something glowing in the dark… He touched the glowing stone… He was in a forest…

Harry gulped. Snape was going to see…

Harry was lying on the forest ground… He turned and came face to face with a Slytherin boy that looked similar to him…

"Stop!" Harry yelled and pushed Snape out of his mind. He fell to his knees, no longer having the energy to stand upright. He felt Snape approached him.

"Who is that boy, Potter?" Snape asked the question Harry knew was coming. "I don't remember having a Slytherin like him."

'Think, Harry, think! You were once a Slytherin! Think of a way to get yourself out of trouble!' he thought desperately.

Harry knew there was no way he could give Snape an answer that would satisfy the man. The only way was to avoid answering the question.

He avoided Snape's eyes, in case he decided to find out the answer by Legilimency, and said in a low voice, "I didn't question you of what I saw in your memory, so please don't question mine…sir." Before Snape exploded, he got up shakily and ran out of the room.

"Potter!" he heard Snape yelled after him.

Severus glared at the retreating form of Harry Potter. How dare that brat talk to him like that?

And who was that boy he saw in Potter's mind anyway? Specking of Potter's mind, the boy's memory was too well organized. He had a feeling that Potter 'let' him see those memories instead of Severus forcing his way into the boy's mind. It was impossible, unless...

… unless Potter was not as 'innocent' as Albus thought, that the boy actually knew both Occlumency and Legilimency.

One thing Severus was certain: Potter had changed, he was no longer the boy he had known for the last few years. Something must have happened during the summer holiday. Potter was hiding it, he didn't even tell Albus. It seemed Potter didn't trust the headmaster as much as Severus originally thought. Severus had a feeling that the identity of that mysterious boy he saw in Potter's memory was the key to unlocking all the secrets.

On Thursday night, everyone in the fifth year Gryffindor dormitory was sleeping peacefully, except one.

Harry made sure the curtains around his bed was closed and whispered a silencing charm so as not to wake up his dorm mates in case something went wrong. He chose to do it on Thursday night so he would have enough time for recovery before his next Monday Occlumency session with Snape.

Harry sat up on his bed. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the connection he shared with Voldemort. He thought of the irony of his action; Dumbledore asked Snape to teach him how to close the connection, though now Harry was trying to open it.

He lowered his mental barrier and reached out. Soon he was stopped by another barrier. Voldemort's mental barrier. Harry hesitated.

Harry knew that this would change everything, by connecting with Tom and telling him his other identity. He knew he could no longer be simply Harry Potter, the fighter for the light side, after this. He would also be Alex Salutor, best friend of Tom Riddle.

He took a deep breath, and attacked. A strong force pushed him out immediately at the moment he invaded, but he stood his ground. He felt strong power emerging from the other side of the link, warning him whoever was at the other end of the link had awoken and aware of his presence.

Harry calmed his nerves and called out,

Tom?

Chapter 6: Darkness

Tom?

Harry got no respond. He ventured deeper into Voldemort's mind and winced at what he found.

Darkness.

Hatred.

Images began to flash before Harry's eyes.

Blood.

Corpses.

Killing curse after killing curse.

People falling to the ground lifelessly.

He heard screams, followed by high pitched laughter.

A girl crying beside her dead parents.

Tortures.

Beatings.

A man crying in pain on the floor.

Harry was scared. What he saw scared him more than anything he had seen in his life. Surrounding him was nothing but negative feelings. How could a person live with all of this inside his mind? He could find nothing that was pleasant at all. No joy. No warmth. And definitely no love.

Harry wanted nothing more than to leave this place, but he knew he couldn't. He swallowed and called out again.

Tom?

Without warning, Harry felt a force blocking him from going any further. Within the darkness he heard a voice.

Potter?

Harry actually felt Voldemort's surprise, but then the surprise turned into suspicion almost immediately.

Legilimency? What is the old fool playing at this time, boy?

Dumbledore doesn't know.

Harry could tell Voldemort didn't quite believe him.

I'm not lying. You would have known if I lied.

Ah, the connection. Interesting… So you, a Gryffindor, learned Legilimency, a dark art, and try to use it to contact the Dark Lord?

Harry suppressed his fear as much as he could and answered firmly,

I need to talk to you.

Harry heard Voldemort's mocking voice,

Now, now, where has Dumbledore's little boy gone?

That boy doesn't exist. At last he no longer exists after the last summer. And I'm not so sure about the Gryffindor part. The hat said I would do well in Slytherin, and I do agree with it to some extent.

The hat wanted to put you in Slytherin?

And actually did.

Do not play with me, Harry Potter.

I was once a Slytherin, you know? Fifty years ago.

Enough with your nonsense, Potter.

Harry could feel Voldemort's impatience. Harry took a deep breath.

Time traveling. You've heard of that, haven't you, Tom?

Harry replied softly.

Do not call me by that name, Potter!

Why? 'Voldemort' is way too long, I'd prefer calling you 'Tom'… or do you prefer 'Voldie'?

Something stirred inside Voldemort's mind. It was a new feeling that was not there before. Harry could not tell what that was as that feeling was engulfed by the surrounding darkness immediately after it was formed.

Assuming that as a good sign, Harry continued,

Don't you remember who choose that name for you?

Again, something in Voldemort's mind responded to Harry's statement. Harry was not sure what that meant, but he knew that Voldemort still remembered Alex. No matter how deep that memory had been buried, it was still there.

Silence followed Harry's statement. Then Harry heard Voldemort's quiet yet dangerous voice,

What have you done, boy?

Harry did not answer, instead he told Voldemort what happened in the summer.

I found Nicolas' stone this summer. I was transported into the past but lost my memory. I was sorted into Slytherin and made a new friend, my only friend during my stay. He was a second year, an

intelligent boy who was an expert in finding hiding places and was as ruthless as any Gryffindor. He-

Harry was stopped by a surge of power rushing towards him. Voldemort was angry. Harry felt as the darkness surrounding him grew thicker, and was about to engulf him. He involuntarily flinched.

That's enough! I don't know what you are playing at, Potter! Get out of my mind this instant!

Again, Harry felt a force pushing him out. He struggled to stand his ground.

I'm Alex, Tom! I'm your fri-

I don't know what you are talking about. GET OUT OF MY MIND!

Voldemort bellowed, pushing Harry out with a stronger force.

I've made a promise long ago that I'd find a way to reach you, no matter what…

Harry forcued to stay in Voldemort's mind.

…happened in the future. And I will keep it. I know you are still…

Enough…

…the same Tom… that I learned to love as…

Get out!

… my brother.

And with that Harry was thrown out of Voldemort's mind and into nothingness.

Harry slowly opened his eyes.

"Harry! You're awake!" he heard Ron's voice.

He knew where he was even without his glasses. The Hospital Wing.

"What happened?" said Harry, putting on his glasses.

He saw Ron and Hermione standing next to his bed, looking worried.

"You fainted!" said Ron. "I tried to wake you up this morning, but you didn't wake up no matter what I did."

"What? I fainted?" It must have been by the force Tom had used to push him out and the power Harry had used to stay in Tom's mind.

"What happened, Harry?" asked Hermione.

What happened? Harry winced. What he saw in Voldemort's mind was so horrible. For the hundredth times he wondered what had happened to Tom. What turned the boy he once knew the way he was now?

He needed to find out what had happened to Tom. And that meant it was time to pay a visit to a certain old alchemist again.

"I'm not sure. Nightmare, I guess," lied Harry.

Hermione frowned. "Is it Vol… Voldemort?

Again, Harry shrugged. Those screams and cold laughter echoed in his mind.

"Dumbledore was worried when we told him," said Ron.

Harry said nothing in respond. He looked around. "How long have I been here?"

"It's near dinner time, but I doubt Madam Pomfrey would let you leave," said Ron.

The medical witch chose that moment to come out out her office.

"Why didn't you call me when he awoke?" she said to Ron and Hermione. "Now out. I need to work."

"What happened, Harry?" asked Hermione again. "You need to tell Dumbledore if anything is wrong."

Harry sighed. "I'm fine. There's no point in disturbing him," he said. "Come on, we'll be late for potions if we don't hurry."

Hermione, who had been walking before Harry, stopped abruptly and turned around to face him, practically blocking Harry's path.

"What?" asked Harry impatiently.

"What happened to you, Harry? You've been acting so strange this year. You tried to befriend Malfoy and you've been distancing yourself from Ron and me. You used to tell Dumbledore everything, but you hardly trust him this year. Something must have happened." finished Hermione.

Harry rubbed his temple. Trust Hermione to be so observant.

"It's Dumbledore who's kept everything from me. He hardly talked to me or met my eyes this year." It was not a lie, though it was not the full reason of why Harry was angry with Dumbledore. "And you're still my best friend, Hermione, both you and Ron. As for Malfoy, I asked him to join HA merely because he knows a great deal about defense." Before Hermione could say anything, Harry continued, "Let's drop it, alright? I assure you nothing has happened to me and I will ask for help if anything goes wrong. Come on, we really need to hurry."

Hermione stared at Harry suspiciously, but said nothing else along their way to the dungeons.

Nicolas looked up from the steaming caldron as he heard a pop sound coming from the living room. He had an anti-apparation ward around his house, which itself was located in the middle of a forest. A spot located in a place like that was perfect for him and his wife to work. And it was safe, too. Only a few people knew about this place.

He took a glance at the figure standing in his living room.

Well, safe might not be the word when a dark lord could enter the house freely.

"Why, Tom, it's been a long time," he greeted the man.

"Long time indeed, Flamel," came a cold reply.

"Flamel? So even I have become a stranger to you?" Nicolas took a look at Voldemort. His red eyes and slit-like nose sent chill down his spine. "What have you done to yourself this time, my child?" he asked softly.

"I am not your child, old man," Voldemort hissed.

Nicolas smiled sadly at the dark lord.

"Don't stare at me that way!" Voldemort snapped.

Nicolas found himself facing the tip of the dark lord's wand.

"Want to kill me, Tom?" Nicolas asked, staring into the red eyes fearlessly.

"It's Lord Vol-"

"Your name is Tom Riddle," said Nicolas, still staring straight at the dark lord.

Voldemort scowled. "I have not been that naïve child for a long time. Before you is Lord Voldemort, no one else."

"Is that it?" Nicolas asked quietly.

Voldemort did not answer, instead he said flatly, "Harry Potter found me yesterday."

Nicolas smiled. "Ah, so he's finally talked to you. By that connection?" he asked.

Voldemort pressed his wand closer, right between Nicolas' eyes. "Do not play games with me, old man. I know you are behind all this. You knew about that connection and told that brat everything. What do you think you can accomplish by this?"

"Harry chose to contact you, Tom. He is Alex, can't you remember your friend?" said Nicolas.

"My friend?" said Voldemort coldly. "It's all a lie. Pretended he did not know me, tried to be my friend and made me lower my defenses. Do you really think I would believe that so-called friendship?"

"Harry cares for you, can't you feel it? Why else would he contact you willingly? He had no memory about the future when he first met you in the past. Do you know how he felt when he came back and knew what his best friend had become?"

"I don't know what you are planning, Flamel, but Alex Salutor means nothing to me, neither do you, so don't waste your time."

"Why are you here, then?" asked Nicolas softly. "You do care, Tom."

"I have abandoned that feeling long ago," said Voldemort.

"No, it's still there, somewhere in your heart. Without that, you'd be nothing. Even animals know how to love, and you'd be even worse than them."

"Crucio!"

Nicolas sink to his knees, gritting his teeth in pain, but he refused scream out. He looked up and saw Voldemort had closed his eyes. The dark lord gritted his teeth and stopped the curse.

"Shut up! Or you will have the same fate as your wife," Voldemort hissed.

Nicolas' eyes hardened. "What holds you back then? Why did you release the curse? You killed and tortured innocent people without a minute's thought. Why did you hold back?" Seeing he would get no respond from the man before him, he continued softly, "You are not as heartless as you think, Tom. Grindelwald was a monster who knew nothing about love. But you, my child, are different. I know Harry will find a way, even if I can't, to bring you back from the darkness you've embedded yourself into."

Voldemort's red eyes met Nicolas'. Nicolas saw a quick flash of emotions in those eyes. Those emotions were not that of hatred, but what Nicolas used to see in young Tom Riddle's eyes.

Voldemort turned away silently. He took out something from his robe pocket with his long pale figures and whispered, "Vado."

Nicolas stared at the space where the dark lord had just disappeared. Maybe there was hope for this child after all.

"Legilimens!"

Harry allowed Snape to view several well-selected memories before blocking the spell with a 'protego'.

Snape eyed him coolly. He raised his wand again only to be interrupted by a knock on his door.

"Uncle Severus?" came Draco Malfoy's voice from behind the door.

Snape pocketed his wand and mentioned Harry to do the same.

"Come in," said Snape.

The door was opened and Malfoy walked into the office. "Uncle Severus, what do you wa… Potter?" he stopped his speech abruptly when he finally spotted Harry.

"Mr. Potter here is having Remedial Potions," said Snape coldly.

"Remedial Potions?" Draco frowned at Harry.

It was obvious to Harry that Malfoy did not believe what Snape said.

"Come, Mr. Malfoy," said Snape, directing the blonde out of the room. He turned back to shoot Harry a glare that told him what the consequences would be if Harry dared to touch anything in his office.

Severus watched his godson with a grim expression as Draco left the potions classroom after their talk. Drace looked troubled. Lucius had asked Severus to 'remind' Draco that his initiation in the Death Eater's ranks would be scheduled two weeks later. Severus had tried all he could without exposing his role as a spy to help his godson to escape his fate, but Draco seemed to be determined to follow his father's footsteps. Or was he?

Several months ago Draco would have been happy to hear the news; of that, Severus was sure. But now the boy seemed to be disturbed. What did that mean?

Severus shook his head and pushed the thoughts of his godson from his mind for the moment. For now, he had a certain student to deal with. Potter had better not have touched anything in his office, or else…

Harry looked around Snape's office idly after he was left alone in the room. Suddenly something caught his eyes. Harry slowly walked towards Snape's open cabinet and found himself staring into Snape's pensieve.

'It must contain Snape's worst memory. I wonder what that is.'

Harry was curious to know what those memories were. For a moment Harry really wanted to take a look at the contents of the pensieve, but something held him back. He himself had some things he didn't want others to know. He knew how it felt when private memories were exposed. Snape must have reasons to keep those memories to himself and Harry had no right to invade that man's privacy.

Harry turned away from the pensieve and shut the cabinet as he walked away. He wondered what Snape was talking about with Malfoy. He could only hope it was not about the blonde's initiation.

It was Wednesday night when Harry finally found a way to escape Ron and Hermione, when they both went to meet McGonagall to discuss their prefect duties. He fled to the Room of Requirement after his last lesson and left for Nicolas' home without wasting any time.

"Lemon drop?"

Harry shook his head.

"So you've talked to Tom?" asked Nicolas.

Harry blinked. "How do you know?"

"You look troubled," Nicolas pointed out.

"It didn't go very well. He got irritated when I talked about Alex." Harry sighed. "I don't know what I should do, Nicolas. It's so… scary. In his mind, there are no good feelings at all. It's full of anger and hatred. The Tom I used to know… I don't understand, what happened to make him like that?"

Nicolas looked at Harry seriously. "Do you really want to help Tom?"

Harry nodded firmly.

"Come, Harry, I'll show you something," said Nicolas.

The old wizard stood up and led Harry into his room. He opened his cabinet and took out something that seemed to be quite heavy.

Harry's eyes widened as he recognized what Nicolas was holding.

"A pensieve!"

Nicolas smiled. "Ah, you've saw it before then?"

He placed the pensieve on the table and beckoned Harry to come closer.

Harry stood next to Nicolas and looked into the pensieve. His flickering reflection looked back at him.

"Come," said Nicolas, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder and pushed him forward gently. "I'll show you what happened to your friend after you left him fifty years ago."

A/N: Thanks for Irihi Safaia and all the reviewers!

Juni: Finally, someone remembers Nagini! There will be an interaction between her and her old master; but whether she recognizes Harry or not, you'll have to wait and see.

schneeleopard: How many chapters are there? Good question. I think there will be at least ten more chapters, but I can't tell you for sure, things get much more complicated than I originally wanted them to be. Actually, this fic is now very different from what I originally planned when I first posted the first chapter of 'Learn from the History'.

There will be more Tom starting from this chapter. The next one will probably be an interlude about what happened to Tom.

Please Review!

Chapter 7: The Road to Darkness

Tom Riddle. Even now, Nicolas found it hard to believe what the boy had become. But he knew, if anyone, he should be the one who was able to anticipate this; for he was the only one who had witnessed the entire process of Tom Riddle's transformation to Lord Voldemort, the darkest wizard after Grindelwald.

"Look, the freak got a visitor!"

"What? Who would like to visit him?"

"Who is he, little Tommy, your freak friend? Oh, I forgot, you don't have any friends, do you?"

Nicolas snapped out of his thought as he heard the voices. He looked sideway at Harry, who was frowning after hearing what the voices had said. Harry did not seem to be startled at all when his whole body had been sucked into the pensieve. Nicolas could only assume Harry had entered someone else's pensieve before. He wondered whose memory the boy had viewed.

Nicolas looked around. They were both standing in the meeting room of an orphanage, where Nicolas had first met young Tom Riddle.

From 'Alex', Nicolas had gathered quite a bit of information about Tom. Since 'Alex' had been so worried about his friend when he had been forced to leave, Nicolas had paid the boy who 'Alex' viewed as a little brother a little visit.

The door opened and Tom Riddle stepped into the room. He eyed Nicolas suspiciously. Without taking his eyes from Nicolas, Tom took the seat opposite to him. The boy's eyes were dull and he was way too small for a thirteen-year-old boy.

Nicolas smiled at him gently. "Nice to meet you, Tom. My name is Nicolas Flamel."

The boy's eyes widened in realization. "You are the one invented Alex's stone, sir?"

Nicolas nodded.

"Why are you here, sir?" the boy asked politely.

Nicolas' eyes caught sight of an odd dark spot on the boy's sleeve, which looked suspiciously like a blood stain.

"What happened to your arm, child?" he asked.

Tom gulped. "Nothing, sir," he answered, quickly hiding his arm from view.

Nicolas frowned.

"I'm fine," the boy assured him.

Nicolas heard Harry snort at that statement.

Nicolas raised his eyebrows, but said nothing about it, since there was no way he could help Tom if the boy refused to tell him what had happened. He hesitated, then took out something from his pocket and handed it to Tom.

"You gave that to him?" asked Harry from beside him.

Nicolas nodded. "I was not sure if it was a good decision or not. But I was afraid the muggles really did abuse him. So I gave that to Tom in case he needed help."

"I'm glad you did," said Harry, sighing.

Nicolas knew Harry was feeling guilty at not being able to be with Tom when the boy needed him.

Harry looked up sharply as if he had suddenly thought of something.

"Does he still have it with him?" he asked, looking uncertain.

Nicolas smiled and turned back to watch the memory without answering the question.

"A stone, sir?" Tom asked.

Nicolas nodded. "It's a portkey." He explained to boy how to use to stone. "Just say 'vado' and it'll bring to my home. In case you need help, or simply want someone to talk to, you are welcome to come and visit me."

Tom blinked. "You are giving this to me, sir?" asked Tom, eyeing the stone in disbelief as if he had never expected anyone would want to help him.

"I believe that's what I've just said," said Nicolas.

"Why?" the boy asked. "Why are you…"

Nicolas frowned at the boy's behavior. "Caring someone needs no reason, child."

Seeing Tom's face filled with uncertainty, Nicolas shook his head. "I see you are as stubborn as Alex told me."

Nicolas' teasing successfully warmed up the boy a little.

Tom snorted. "Alex was even worse."

Harry rolled his eyes at that.

Nicolas chuckled. "Take the stone, child, and you are welcome to come to me if you need anything."

Tom hesitated. He looked up at Nicolas, then took the stone slowly.

"Thank you, sir," said Tom softly. "That means a lot to me."

"You're welcome," said Nicolas. "And please, call me Nicolas."

Tom smiled for the first time during the conversation.

"Thank you, Nicolas."

They watched as Tom left the room, the teasing of the other orphans came back immediately when the door was opened.

Harry sighed. "Did they beat him again?" he asked wearily.

Nicolas nodded. "Several times," he said. "But they dared not do that again after I… threatened them a little with my wand." He winked at Harry. "And the snake you gave Tom did a great job in protecting him. From what I've heard, that snake nearly bit several of the kids who had teased Tom, had Tom not stopped it in time. They would have died otherwise. The venom of that snake could kill if the victim was not given the antidote in time."

Harry seemed to feel better after he knew he did help Tom to improve his living condition in same way.

Nicolas then told Harry what had happened after his first meeting with Tom as they continued to watch several more memories. It was quite obvious that Tom had become more relaxed around Nicolas after several visits and had grown closer to him when time proceeded.

A little closer. The boy was so distrusting that it was impossible for anyone to break through the thick wall Tom had built around himself. Nicolas still did not understand how 'Alex' had broken through Tom's defense wall and become such a good friend with the boy. But he knew that if anyone could possibly drag Tom out from the hole he had fallen into, it was Harry.

Honestly, Nicolas had no idea how much hope was left for Tom, but he knew he had to try. He knew Harry felt the same way as he did. That was why Harry had told him that he could never kill Tom; the same went for why Nicolas had refused to join the order again when Albus had asked him years ago.

Then they reached the memories of Tom Riddle's fifth year. It was obvious how much the boy had changed over the years. Nicolas had been contacting Tom constantly throughout the boy's third year,

mostly by owl post. When he visited the boy again in the orphanage that summer, he had noticed something was different about him. Tom had been even colder than he had used to be and… darker. Nicolas had been busying with various missions of the order at that time and had not paid much attention to the changes until it was mcuh too late.

Soon after the start of his fourth year, Tom had started to distance himself from Nicolas. He had barely contacted him during the whole year. It was that summer when Nicolas met Tom again that he knew something was wrong, very wrong.

Tom Riddle reluctantly stepped into the room and dropped himself on the chair.

"He's changed," Harry muttered. "He is changing over the years."

Nicolas studied Tom. The fifteen-year-old boy was indeed very different from his younger counterpart Nicolas had just seen several minutes ago. This Tom was obviously more confident. And something about him made Nicolas feel uneasy.

"Why don't you answer my letter, Tom?" asked Nicolas cautiously.

"I've been busy," said Tom. "I must have missed it somehow."

Nicolas frowned and asked slowly, "You are the one, are you? You are the one we've been searching for."

Tom winced. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Nicolas looked straight into Tom's eyes The boy averted his gaze a little too late.

Nicolas closed his eyes. "I thought so," he whispered. "But why? Why did you accept?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tom repeated.

Nicolas sighed. "I only want to help, my child."

"You won't understand," said Tom hoarsely.

"Tom…"

"Just leave me alone!" Tom snapped, gritting his teeth. Then, as seeing Nicolas' worrying gaze, he sighed. "Just leave me be."

With that said, Tom quickly retreated from the room.

"What has happened?" Harry eyed to retreating form of Tom. "He is so different."

"Have you heard of Grindelwald, Harry?" asked Nicolas.

Harry shook his head, looking confused at the question.

"Grindelwald was the Dark Lord, it was he who turned your friend into what he is right now." said Nicolas quietly.

That gained Harry's full attention. "What?"

"Grindelwald was a very powerful wizard. He believed the wizarding folks were superior and the muggles were worthless creatures. He had recruited numerous supporters and dark creatures to help him, and his dark influence was expanding rapidly. It was a dark time, Harry." Nicolas paused, momentarily losing in his memory. He took a deep breath and continued, "About one and a half year after you left, the spy of the order brought the news that Grindelwald, in order to gain an upper hand in the war, had found an heir, and had been training the child himself. The order had been searching for the identity of the child since then, with little success. I had my own suspicion at that time. Unfortunately, my guess was correct."

"Tom?" Harry asked shakily.

Nicolas nodded. "Tom is a very powerful wizard and he is the heir of Slytherin. With the strong dislike Tom held towards muggles, he was perfect for Grindelwald to shape into his dark weapon."

Harry paled. "But… why? Why would Tom join him? He wouldn't let anyone control him."

"Grindelwald used Tom's hatred to his advantage. He provoked Tom's negative emotions and step by step transforms him into a heartless torturer," said Nicolas, his eyes hardened. "Gindelwald also offered Tom one of the things he wanted most- power. He provided a great opportunity for Tom to take revenge against all those who had hurt him before."

Harry closed his eyes. "Tom…"

Nicolas looked at Harry with sympathy. "How you heard of what happened in Tom's fifth year, Harry?"

Harry went even paler. He looked up and said, "He opened the Chamber of Secrets and..."

"Made his first kill," Nicolas finished for him.

The scene of the pensieve changed and they found themselves back to Nicolas' room.

"After that incident, I kind of… kidnapped Tom to my house and confronted him. He was shaken after the incident, especially because he was responsible for the death of a student. There was not much I could have done though, Tom was already deeply influenced by Grindelwald at that time," said Nicolas sadly. "It was the last time I saw him… as Tom Riddle, not Voldemort."

"Tom!"

Tom Riddle looked up to face Nicolas.

"This is my choice," he said flatly.

"He's using you."

"He offers what I always want."

Nicolas shook his head. "Power is not everything, my child."

"This is my chance to show everyone what I can do," Tom retorted.

"The Tom Riddle I know has always despised people torturing others merely because they have the power to do so," said Nicolas softly.

"They deserve it," said Tom.

"That's not the right way, and you know that," said Nicolas.

"There is no good and evil, there is only power and those too weak to seek it," said Tom.

"Grindelwald has been brainwashing you."

"He has not!" shouted Tom. "The muggles deserve it! You too know what they've done to me."

"Yes, I know." Nicolas sighed. "But you never want to hurt them."

Tom narrowed his eyes. "People change, Nicolas. I used to be so naïve, but not anymore. Now I understand things better. I know what I should do."

"Tom…"

"Why should I care, anyway?" Tom continued. "They hate me, or are trying to use me. Now I will have power over them and no one can ever hurt me again."

Tom reached for the portkey in his pocket.

"This is the road I have chosen," said Tom. "I know you work for the light side, Nicolas. I won't come here again, then."

They both knew that by the time Tom activated the stone, they would be enemies, working for their own side.

"What about Alex?" asked Nicolas weakly before Tom said the activation spell. "Have you forgotten him? What will he think of you in the future?"

Tom lowered his head and did no answer for a long time.

"Alex cares for you as though you are his brother. It will hurt him greatly if you continue being like this."

"I can't turn back, not now." said Tom. "Alex will hate me for what I've done, and what I'm going to do. I know he will never work for the dark side, it's not like him. I've broken my promise to him, and if we meet again…"

Tom turned back and before he shouted 'vado', he said a last sentence with a barely audible voice,

"Then he of all people has the right to kill me."

A/N: Now, I've lost control over a certain alchemist, who is becoming more and more important in this story. And he wouldn't even exist in this story had I not wanted a better reason than 'accident' to bring Harry back in time... But then, he's in the best position to help Harry. Anyway, expect to see more about him in the future.

Again, thanks for Irihi Safaia and all the reviewers!

orlin: Let's say, everything in the first part is more or less related to this part. And soon after this chapter, history is going to repeat itself. (Now, I'm sounding like Dumbledore…)

As for the OWLs, you're right, Alex's result will not be valid. Since Harry is still in his fifth year, he'll need to take his OWLs again, though his result will more or less be similar to Alex's.

silverkitcat: Nagini is there in the graveyard. But it confused her since the appearance of Alex is different from Harry. Harry will meet her again in the future, but then, Nagini is always staying beside Voldemort…

Roxy: Oh, thanks for pointing it out! I'm sorry for the mistake, and I've already corrected it.

Please Review!

Chapter 8: The Choices

"Mr. Potter!"

Harry looked up to face an impatient Professor McGonagall.

"Yes, Professor?"

"I've been calling you several times, Mr. Potter. Now, pay attention," said Professor McGonagall, before continuing her lecture.

Harry rubbed his forehead. He could not concentrate on his lessons at all. His mind was filled with one thought only: Tom.

After viewing Nicolas' memory, Harry couldn't help but feel guilty. He wasn't there when Tom needed him and he called himself the boy's friend! It hurt greatly to see how Tom transformed into Voldemort gradually, while Harry could not do anything to stop it.

"Then he of all people has the right to kill me."

Tom's statement had been repeating in his mind ever since he had come out of the pensieve. If what the prophecy said was true, he was the only one who could kill Tom. If he didn't do it, then no one else could rid the world of Voldemort and the world would be doomed. Yet Harry knew he couldn't do it. He could never kill his best friend.

He had known since he had heard of the prophecy that he only had one choice left:

To drag Tom away from the dark.

After viewing the memories and actually being inside Tom's head once, Harry fully understood how hard it would be. The hole Tom had fallen into was so deep that no one could possibly reach in. But then, as Nicolas had told him after he had voiced out his thought- if anyone, Harry was the only one who could do it.

Harry was unable to reach into Tom's mind after he had been thrown out the last time. Voldemort had built a thick mental barrier to prevent

Harry from contacting him again. And Harry could not actually send Voldemort a letter by owl anyway, though he was quite interested to see Umbridge's face when she intercepted the letter, as Harry was sure she would. There was no way Harry could bring Tom back from the dark in his current situation, unless-

"Mr. Potter!" McGonagall exclaimed. "I will give you detention next time. Now answer my question."

Harry blinked. He had no idea what question he was supposed to answer.

That evening, after lying on his bed for an hour without having much success in falling asleep, Harry finally gave up trying. He reached into his trunk and grabbed his invisibility cloak. Making sure everyone was still sleeping, he snuck out of the room soundlessly.

As Harry slipped out of the Gryffindor tower, he was unaware that someone else in the tower was also wide awake and was currently staring at a piece of old-looking parchment. He was also unaware that something was missing from his trunk.

Harry found himself wandering in the castle under his invisibility cloak. Normally he would have gone to the Room of Requirement, but the place that would bring back so many memories was hardly the place Harry wanted to be at the moment. He needed a place where he could think carefully, and logically. He knew the result would be fatal if he was clouded by emotions. Without realizing where he was going, Harry soon found himself standing outside the HA meeting room. He opened the door and went into the room, only to find himself nose-to-wand with Draco Malfoy.

The blonde narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Who's there?"

Harry looked around the deserted corridor. He made sure no one was there before pulling down his invisibility cloak.

"Potter!" Malfoy looked startled, though he managed to keep his voice low. "What are you doing here?" he hissed but stepped aside to let Harry in.

Harry slipped into the room, carefully closing the door behind him. "I could ask the same of you," he said.

Harry walked to the side of the room and dropped himself on a cushion which they had put there for practicing 'stupefy'.

"I can't sleep, so I came here," said Harry. "And you?"

Malfoy looked about to answer but stopped himself in the last second. He looked back at Harry and sneered. "It's none of your business, Potter."

Harry rolled his eyes. Well, Malfoy was still Malfoy.

It seemed Harry had no luck in finding a quiet place, though Malfoy was not a bad company either. Harry found himself enjoying time spent working with the Slytherin, something Harry could never have imagined himself enjoying a year ago. But Harry had somewhat gotten used to the Slytherins' ways of living and communicating with each other by now.

Apparently, Malfoy had also given up his choice of spending the night alone. The blonde summoned a cushion to him and sat across from Harry. The uneasiness radiating from the blonde was so intense that any Legilimens could feel it. Then Malfoy finally broke the silence.

"Since you're here, Potter, I may as well tell you," Malfoy started. "I'm not coming to the HA meetings anymore."

"What?" Harry looked up sharply. "Why?"

"I told you when I agreed to join that I will have the right to quit at any time, so I don't think I need to explain myself to you," answered Malfoy coldly.

"But you enjoy the meetings!" Harry protested.

Malfoy sneered. "Why would I enjoy teaching those mudbloods? I would rather spend my time elsewhere."

Harry raised his eyebrows at the lie. He had been surprised when he had first found out that Malfoy knew nothing about guarding his mind and detecting lies at all. So it was not a problem for Harry to find out when Malfoy was lying. Harry could only think of one possible reason of why the pure-blooded Slytherin did not know Occlumency: It would be much easier for Lucius Malfoy to control his son that way.

"Does it have anything to do with what Snape told you the day when I had my… er… Remedial Potions?"

Malfoy stiffened slightly, just enough for Harry to notice.

"Is it… Voldemort?" said Harry with a resigning tone. "You're going to be marked, aren't you?"

Malfoy seemed to be oblivious to Harry's tone when he said the name 'Voldemort', since he was as uncomfortable as Harry was at the topic, though for two different reasons.

"I don't know what you mean, Potter," said blonde cautiously.

Malfoy looked up and Harry met his gaze as he said the answer. Despite what the blonde said, the answer from Malfoy's mind was a resounding 'yes'.

Harry shook his head. "You're a bad liar, you know, Malfoy?" he said.

Malfoy narrowed his eyes.

"Have you ever heard of Occlumency and Legilimency?"

Malfoy blinked. "Father has mentioned it once. He said it's just some useless stuff."

Harry laughed dryly. "Useless stuff?" he said. "They are two of the most useful weapons." He looked into Malfoy's grey eyes. "Tell me, Malfoy, do you really want to be a Death Eater?"

Malfoy did not answer, but the pride of the Malfoy's family had betrayed him. Proud as Malfoy was, he refused to avoid Harry's gaze, and that was a mistake.

Harry was surprised but relieved at the same time when he got a firm 'no' from the blonde's mind this time.

"Then why? If you don't want it, why are you still taking the mark?" said Harry.

Malfoy scowled. "I never said-"

"As defenseless as your mind is," Harry interjected. "To… Voldemort will know you are not willingly working for him as soon as he sees you," said Harry.

"My mind?" Malfoy frowned. "The Dark Lord can read minds?"

Harry chuckled as he remembered what Snape had told him the other day when the potions master tried to analyze the difference of 'mind-reading' and Legilimency, though personally, Harry did not see any difference between them.

"You can say that. He can detect your lies and know you're not loyal to him," said Harry. "As I told you, Occlumency and Legilimency are very useful. And I'm sure your father will agree with me."

"My father said-"

"Your father is lying to you. He's manipulating you," said Harry coldly.

"My father would not do that," Malfoy hissed.

After spending a year with all those pureblood Slytherins, Harry knew the effect their families had on them.

"You don't need to do what your father asks of you," said Harry. "You don't need to do what you don't want."

Malfoy gritted his teeth. "Shut up, Potter."

"It's not too late, Malfoy," said Harry. "If you don't want it, then turn away from that side while you still have a choice."

Malfoy stared at him. "No, Potter, I don't have a choice," he said coldly. "You will never understand."

The Slytherin stood up and made his way to the exit.

"Malfoy!" Harry jumped up and grabbed Malfoy's shoulder, stopping the blonde in his tracks.

Malfoy turned around sharply, his eyes flashing with anger.

"Leave me alone, Potter," he hissed, trying to shove Harry aside.

Harry did not let go. "You are not your father. You can always choose your own road."

Malfoy glared at Harry.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Malfoy said in a dangerous voice. "Everyone expects you to be on the side of the light, just as you are. And the Malfoys are always working for the dark. I am, by default, an evil wizard and a Death Eater- in-training. Choosing my own road?" Malfoy laughed coldly. "You will never understand how much it takes to fight against those expectations and what I will lose if I turn away from the road that is meant for me."

"Yes, you may lose many things if you choose to do something you know is right. And it will be much easier if you just give in." said Harry. "We all have to choose, Malfoy. Whether to take the easy road and submit to others' expectation or take the risk and to do what we know is right."

Harry grabbed his invisibility cloak.

"I do understand your feelings. You have no idea how similar our situations are," he said softly. "Well," he smiled slightly at the blonde, "see you in the next HA meeting then."

With that, Harry went back to the dormitory, leaving a confused Malfoy in the room with his thoughts.

On his way back to the Gryffindor tower, Harry thought back on the conversation he had just had with Malfoy. He was telling the truth when he said they were in very similar situations. In fact, what he had told the blonde could be used back on Harry himself.

The problem was, did he dare? Did he dare to risk everything he held dear to do what he hoped was right?

Without even realizing it, Harry had already reached the portrait of the Fat Lady. He muttered the password and went into the common room. He groaned inwardly when he saw who was waiting for him there.

'Not now. I don't want to deal with this,' he thought, knowing there was no way he could get away this time.

Hermione stepped before him and crossed her arm. "Where have you been, Harry?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I just went out for a walk," said Harry, sticking to the truth.

"Do you know how dangerous it is?" said Hermione angrily, trying to force her voice low. "It's very irresponsible of you, Harry. Everyone has been worrying about your safety and you sneak out alone like that!"

Harry gritted his teeth. "I don't need anyone to worry about me. I can protect myself, Hermione."

"How can you say that? V-Voldemort is out there trying to capture you. How can we not worry about you? And you know Umbridge would be very pleased to catch you wandering around after curfew. You could put Dumbledore in great trouble."

Harry clenched his fists.

"And just what are you doing with Malfoy, Harry?"

Harry looked up sharply and narrowed his eyes.

"How do you know I was with Malfoy just now?" he hissed.

Hermione winced at his tone.

"You've been spying on me?" Harry continued angrily.

"I'm worried about you," said Hermione quietly. "Ron was right, it's too dangerous for you to stay with Malfoy alone."

"He is not his father. And I thought you of all people should understand about prejudice," said Harry coldly. "And don't avoid my question. How long have you been spying on me?"

Hermione swallowed. "Since last week after you passed out in the night."

Harry suddenly felt glad that he had managed to come back from Nicolas' place before Ron and Hermione finished the meeting they had with McGonagall last night. Otherwise he would be in deep trouble. If Hermione reacted this way when she found out he had snuck out after curfew and met Malfoy alone, he could not imagine what she would say if she knew Harry had actually snuck out of Hogwarts and went to a place where Voldemort could enter freely.

It would certainly do him no good if he let Hermione continue. He wondered how she had managed to spy on him.

Harry looked into Hermione eyes and searched for the answer. After a while he pulled out his wand.

"Accio Marauder's Map!"

Hermione widened her eyes. "How did you kn-"

Harry grabbed the map then dashed back to the dormitory before Hermione could finish her question.

Finally back in the dormitory, Harry hid the map in his trunk and slipped back on his bed. He stared at the dark ceiling, Hermione's voice echoing in his mind.

He was still angry at what Hermione had done. But the anger was quickly replaced by guilt. He must admit, Hermione was quite right. After the summer, Harry had been unintentionally distancing himself from Ron and Hermione. He had been trying so hard to contact Tom and to help Malfoy that he had kind of ignored his two other friends. Harry knew with the awakening of his Slytherin side and the secret that he was so determined to keep, his relation with the two Gryffindors would no longer be the same, but he still treasured their friendships dearly. After all, Ron and Hermione were his first two friends.

Then the guilt turned into fear. If Harry was to help Tom, he was almost certain that he would lose his two friends. He would not forgive himself for hurting Ron and Hermione, but…

He pulled out his necklace and clutched tightly around the warm crystal.

… something needed to be done. Harry was Tom's only friend, and Harry was the only one who could help him.

Harry shut his eyes. From the moment he had heard about the prophecy, he had known he had little chance to live past his seven years in Hogwarts. If he would be dead either way, he might as well try his insane idea.

He had no idea that death was nothing compared to the pain he was going to endure.

A/N: Not much has happened in this chapter, merely some set-up for the future chapters. So, what is Harry's so-called 'idea'? (Take a look at the previous chaptersand you may find it out.)

Thanks for Irihi Safaia and all the reviewers!

HazelWolf: Will Harry remind Tom of that sentence? Sorry, can't answer that, you'll have to wait and see.

Honestly, I have no idea how long this story will be. I've created quite a lot of sub-plots and unintentionally making the story more and more complicated. Adding that fact that several characters are now out of my control and I have no idea what they will do to the plot.

Yes, I agree that it would be a funny scene if that 'last battle' is in front of everyone. That is, if there is indeed a last battle scene. Again, you'll have to wait and find out. I assure you that there will be several shocking-people scenes in the future. It will be fun to write people's reaction when they find out Harry's secret.

Agnus Dei: Tom is Voldemort. I'm afraid he'll be even worse in the future chapters… Well, let's just see what Harry's going to do with that then.

orlin: Yes, Harry will talk to Tom again of course. (Skipping the other question…) You'll have to wait and see…

Sarah: Good question. Yes, Harry can feel Voldemort's feeling and Voldemort can also feel Harry's feeling. And that ability is very important for this story.

ScrewyLouie12: Sorry, but there's not enough space for me to put that in the summery. I've put it in the prologue though.

Milky Etoile: That is a quote from book two, said by one Tom Marvolo Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets.

As much as he don't want to accept the truth, Voldemort have to believe that Harry is Alex since they can't lie to each other through their connection. He knew Harry was telling the truth when he said he was Alex.

Please Review!

Chapter 9: Snape's Worst Memory

Harry yawned. In the end, he could only get a few hours of sleep last night. He glanced at the bed next to his. Ron was not there, had probably already gone to the great hall for breakfast.

He went down to the common room and groaned inwardly when he saw who was waiting for him there. How could he have forgotten? Of course Ron would be waiting with Hermione to confront him.

Harry knew Ron was also in it to spy on him. How else could Hermione get his Marauder's Map?

"Morning Ron, Hermione," he drawled.

"Harry! What were you doing with Malfoy?" Ron exploded

Harry suppressed his urge to roll his eyes. He glanced around, feeling glad that the common room was empty except the three of them. If this spread out, it would certainly complicate the matter.

"It's merely coincidence that I met him in the HA room," he said, trying to keep his voice natural.

"But Hermione said you stayed there with him for a long time! What were you doing with that filthy Death Eater?"

Harry's expression hardened. "Malfoy is not a Death Eater," he said coolly. "And just how do you know I've stayed with him for a long time, Ron?" He saw Ron flinched. "I can't believe you and Hermione would do such a thing."

"I am sorry, Harry. It was really rude of me," said Hermione. She bit her lip. "But you really shouldn't have done that, it's so dangerous."

Harry felt his anger slowly melting away.

"I know," he said quietly. "I know you're worried, but couldn't you just ask me?"

"I've tried," said Hermione. "But you just wouldn't tell us what's wrong. You kept avoiding my questions. We were afraid you'd put yourself in danger again, so we…" She tailed off, looking uneasy.

"What are you hiding from us, Harry?" asked Ron. "You always slipp away alone this year, and with something between you and Malfoy…" He gritted his teeth. "I mean, we are your best mates and you didn't tell us anything!"

Harry looked away. "I am sorry," he said. "I know I've not been… as close to you this year as I used to be. I didn't mean to, but something happened this summer, and I couldn't just ignore it." He sighed, trying hard to put the thoughts of Tom away.

"What-" Hermione started, but Harry cut her off by shaking his head.

"I can't tell you," he said in a low voice. "I'm sorry, but you won't understand." Harry held up his hands to stop the protesting. "Please, Ron, Hermione, let me deal with this alone."

Ron looked hurt. "But we've been through so much together in the past. Tell us, we can help you."

He looked back at his friends wearily. "Not this time, Ron. This is my own problem, no one can help me."

Harry stared at his friends, hoping they would understand.

Finally Hermione sighed. "If that's what you want, Harry," she said quietly. "But please, don't do anything dangerous. Remember there are people who will be worried if anything happened to you."

"I don't know what you are planning, mate." Ron started reluctantly. "I don't like Malfoy and I don't understand why you trust him, but I believe you know what you're doing. Just remember if you need help, Hermione and I will always be there."

Harry nodded, surprised that Ron could be so understanding. It seemed he had seriously underestimated his red-haired friend. That

made him feel even worse, knowing that what he was going to do would hurt his two friends greatly.

Harry smiled sadly. "Thank you, Ron, Hermione."

The two Gryffindors smiled back.

"What are friends for?"
Ron and Hermione did leave Harry alone after their conversation that morning, for which Harry was graceful. He knew his two friends were still keeping an eye on him, but he didn't mind as long as they gave him some privacy.

Harry was again in the Room of Requirement, but this time the room appeared to be a training room. The room was decorated in black and dark green in general. It had a stone floor with several armchairs near the wall. The room was dark but quite comfortable, and it strongly reminded Harry of the Slytherin common room.

A week had passed since Harry's night-time discussion with Malfoy and a week since Harry had first 'created' this room. Though he had known clearly what the Room of Requirement could do, he had been quite surprised when he had first entered his 'training room'.

The room itself had contained everything he needed for his 'training'. On the far side of the room were several practicing dummies. Lined up along the wall were four large book shelves, three of which Harry chose to just ignore for the moment. What disturbed Harry most was the cabinet on the dark corner of the room. Every time he thought of what he had seen when he first checked out what it contained, Harry felt his blood turned cold. Behind the wooden door of the cabinet, was a large spider's web, with over fifty spiders crawling on it. Again, Harry chose to ignore it for the moment.

Harry scanned the titles of the books on the fourth bookshelf and picked one out. He sat down on one of the armchairs and started reading.

Written in bold letters on the first page of the book was the title-Apparation.

Severus watched Draco Malfoy closely, or rather, he watched the boy's smoking caldron closely. The potion they were brewing today was a dangerous one; one that was highly explosive.

He did not know what had happened, but his godson had been obviously distracted for the past week. It was not like Draco, his best Potions student, to mess up like that in a potion.

Was it because of the upcoming initiation that Sunday? Severus mused. He certainly did not want to lose his godson to that bastard, but it was hard to do anything too obvious without endangering his position as a spy. He hoped Draco could see the error of his father's way in time.

Draco grimaced after adding another ingredient. Severus glanced at the now ugly green potion in boy's caldron and frowned slightly. His potion was as bad as Pot- no, Longbottom's, he could only hope their caldrons would not end up exploding at the same time.

He shifted his gaze to another student, Harry Potter. He must admit, Potter's grade in Potions had improved dramatically this year. And as much as he wanted to, he found he could no longer insult the boy with his Potions grade, not when he had managed to match Draco in the subject. What disturbed Severus most was that when he watched Potter during lessons, he somehow had a feeling that the boy actually enjoyed brewing potions.

He had heard from his colleagues that Potter's behaviour in classes this year had been questionable. Most of them had said that yes, Potter's grades had improved, but he had not been paying much attention in classes. And from what they had said, the situation had even worsened in the past few days. Minevra had even gone to Albus in a rage after one transfiguration lesson, complaining about Potter's attitude. Not that Severus was surprised, the boy was James Potter's sonafter all. Since when did the word 'rule' matter to that arrogant brat?

Severus snorted inwardly. Since when did he pay so much attention at Potter?

Since their Occlumency lessons had started, Severus mused absentmindedly as he continued to watch the students. He had not managed to find out more about the mysterious Slytherin that he had seen in one of Potter's memories, but the more he practiced Occlumency with the boy, the more he felt something was wrong. After invading Potter's mind for many times, he had a feeling that the boy was hiding something; something big. While Severus was curious to know his nemesis' son's secret, he was also aware of the fact that Potter had actually managed to hide it from him, when the boy appeared to be incompetent in Occlumency. Did Potter unconsciously push his secret memories to the deepest layer of his mind? Or was it as Severus had suspected a month ago that Potter was actually a Legilimens?

Severus found he could no longer stand the thought that he might have been fooled, by Potter no less. It was time for him to find out the truth about Potter's abilities.

A loud explosion startled Severus out of his thoughts. He rubbed his temple.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor! Now clean up the mess, Longbottom," he snapped.
Harry smiled slightly in satisfactory as he bottled his potion. He had been afraid that with the disturbing thoughts in his mind, he would somehow mess up with the potion. But surprisingly, once he had started the fire and started brewing the potion, he had been able to concentrate fully on the process. He even felt that the brewing process had somehow eased his mind and made him feel more relax. Harry paused. Since when did he start to enjoy Potions?

He glanced at the Slytherin side of the classroom. Dra… Malfoy had already left the class earlier without handing in any sample. Malfoy's potion was a total failure and there was no point in struggling to make it right.

Harry labeled his vial of potion and carefully placed it on Snape's desk. He quickly packed his bag and followed Ron and Hermione out of the classroom, but a voice stopped him just before he left the room.

"Stay back, Potter," came Snape's voice from behind him.

Harry sighed and motioned Ron and Hermione to leave without him. He walked back into the classroom, wondering what Snape wanted.

After the last student had left the classroom, Snape pulled out his wand to lock the door and muttered a silencing charm on it. Then he turned around sharply and pointed his wand at Harry.

"Legilimens!"

The spell took Harry totally off guard. He stepped back when the spell hit him. Instinctively, upon feeling another presence in his mind, Harry strengthened his mental barrier and pushed Snape out of his mind, with a stronger force than necessary.

"I am bored," said a much younger Sirius. "Wish it was full moon."

"This'll liven you up, Padfoot," said James Potter, "Look who it is…"

"Excellent, Snivellus."

James Potter approached a younger Severus Snape.

"All right, Snivellus?"

Snape reacted quickly as if he had been expecting the attack.

James' smile widened "Expelliarmus!"

Snape fell onto the ground.

Sirius laughed. "Impendimenta!"

Harry felt a strong force pushing him out. He looked around and found himself back in the Potions classroom.

What was that? Why had his father and Sirius attacked Snape? From what he had just seen, Snape had done nothing wrong at all. Was it

simply because Sirius said he was bored? He looked up and saw Snape was standing before him, looking very angry.

"You knew Occlumency all along, didn't you, Potter?" Snape said in a voice that sent chill down Harry's spine.

Harry immediately realized his mistake. Only a skilled Occlumens could have possibly pushed Snape out with such a force and only a Legilimens could have stayed in Snape's mind long enough to view his memories. Harry had forgotten that he was supposed to be incompetent in Occlumency. He paled. Both Occlumency and Legilimency were dark magic, how could Harry account for his skills?

"I..."

Before Harry could utter a believable excuse, Snape had grabbed Harry's arm with such a force that it made Harry hiss in pain and started dragging him out of the classroom.

"You will explain yourself to the headmaster, Potter."
A/N: So, here's another short chapter. What will our dear headmaster say? And why on earth does Harry want to learn apparation? Again, as I've said before, 'history' is going to repeat itself.

Thanks for Irihi Safaia and all the reviewers!

schneeleopard: You'll see more about Draco in the next chapter.

Yes, I think the story may be going a bit too fast, but the main focus of this fic is still Harry and Tom, I don't want to leave Tom out for too long.

As for Hermione, yes, Ron helped her to get the map, but the whole plan was mainly Hermione's idea. I don't think Ron would involve too much in the plan, as he is not the kind of person that would spy on his friend. And wouldn't it be unwise to spy on your friend when the said friend was sleeping beside you?

HazelWolf11: Tom and Harry will meet again. But under what circumstance?

bwre4: I agree. Tom is certainly more likable than Voldemort. But Voldemort will not be Voldemort if he can be turned nice again that easily.

Please Review!

Chapter 10: Complication

Snape banged open the door to the headmaster's office and dragged Harry in behind him.

"Severus? Harry?" Dumbledore seemed to be surprised to see both Harry and Snape in his office.

'I'm in deep trouble,' thought Harry. 'How could I be so careless?'

Snape strode into the office. Harry, though, stopped before Fawkes, hoping to gain himself some time.

"Hi, Fawkes," Harry greeted the phoenix.

Seeing Fawkes again made Harry remember Tom Riddle's first attempt to open the Chamber of Secrets. He smiled sadly as he thought back to how he had gotten those scars on his left arm.

"Thank you for saving my life… again," Harry whispered, petting the phoenix.

Fawkes rubbed his beak on Harry's chin in affection.

"Potter!" came Snape's impatient voice from the other side of the office.

Harry sighed. "See you later, Fawkes," he said, then walked wearily towards the headmaster's desk and sat next to Snape.

"What happened?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry noticed in annoyance that Dumbledore was still avoiding his eyes. Harry glanced at his Potions professor. The man was fuming, and was glaring at Harry with utter hatred. Whether it was because he had been fooled by Harry for the past few months or because Harry had just seen a private memory of the man, Harry could not tell.

While Snape was recounting what had happened, Harry was using all his skill as an ex-Slytherin to think of a way out.

He was not going to tell Dumbledore anything, for that he was sure. Not about the magical stone, not about time travel, and certainly not about Tom.

Quicker then Harry wanted, Snape had finished his story and Dumbledore turned his attention to Harry.

"Harry?"

Harry concentrated and strengthened his mental barrier. He looked up and met his headmaster's eyes for the first time in months.

Dumbledore bored his eyes into Harry's. As Harry had anticipated, he immediately felt a strong force attacking his mind. As strong as Dumbledore's Legilimency was, Harry managed to stand his ground. Though Harry was not that skilled in Legilimency, he was confident that not even Dumbledore could break into his mind if he refused to let him in.

After a while, the force subsided.

"Since when did you learn Occlumency, my boy?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry bit back making comments about that 'my boy'.

"Since the beginning of the school year, sir," said Harry. "I'd been having nightmares this summer. They were so real that they didn't seem to be dreams at all and my scar hurt every time when I woke up. So I guess maybe it was because of Voldemort. I remembered you saying at the end of my second year that Voldemort and I shared a connection through my scar, so I wondered if this was the reason that I had those nightmares. So when I came back to Hogwarts, I went to the library and tried to search for the answer. That was when I heard of Occlumency. I guessed it might help me to stop those dreams, so I learned it secretly by myself."

"You learned Occlumency by yourself?" said Snape from beside him suspiciously.

Harry nodded. "I'd been practicing for nearly two months before I got it right. I couldn't tell Ron and Hermione. It's dark magic after all. And that's why I hid it from you when Professor Dumbledore asked me to take Occlumency lessons." Harry turned to Dumbledore. "I'm sorry, sir. I know it's dark magic, but my scar was hurting so badly that…." Harry tailed off, lowering his head for effect.

"It is okay, Harry. But I am not happy with what you've done. It is dangerous for you to learn Occlumency without supervision," said Dumbledore.

'And why should I care whether you are happy or not,' thought Harry angrily. 'I am not your pawn. I don't need you to tell me what to do!'

"How about Legilimency, Potter?" said Snape, narrowing his eyes. "You didn't learn it for 'self-protection', did you?"

Harry stiffened, but he managed to stick to his act. "Legilimency? I don't know what you mean, sir, but I didn't learn it."

Learning Occlumency for protection was one thing, but learning Legilimency, another dark magic, an offensive one at that, was an entirely different matter. It would be better for Harry to just deny knowing it.

"Don't lie to me, Potter!" Snape growled.

"I didn't lie, sir," lied Harry.

"Then care to explain what you have done just now?" said Snape with a voice that made Harry understand why the ministry never truly believed that Snape was no longer a Death Eater. "Only a Legilimens could possibly stay in someone else's mind long enough to view memories."

"But I really don't know Legilimency, sir," said Harry. "Maybe it was because the attack just now took me by surprise, so I pushed you out with a force stronger than usual and somehow ended up following you into your mind by the impulse? That's possible, isn't it, sir?" he directed the last question to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore looked thoughtful. "I suppose so, Harry. But I've never seen such a case before."

Harry shrugged. "Not that I'm not used having some abnormal skills anyway," he said.

Dumbledore chuckled. "That you are right, Harry."

Harry inwardly cheered. Dumbledore was a Gryffindor after all. On the contrary, the head of Slytherin was much harder to deal with.

Dumbledore was a Gryffindor after all? Where did that come from? It sounded as if being a Gryffindor was a bad thing…

'Don't forget that you, yourself, are a Gryffindor, Harry.' Somehow, Harry was not that sure about that anymore. He was sure that even Snape would be impressed by his Slytherin act just now.

Harry was right that Snape would not be satisfied that easily.

"Potter-" Snape started.

"Severus," Dumbledore shook his head slightly.

Snape sneered, but remained quiet. Harry sighed in relief mentally. He was not sure how long he could hold on to his story.

Dumbledore turned back to Harry, looking thoughtful, as if he was trying to make a difficult decision. Harry met the old man's eyes calmly.

Finally, Dumbledore sat upright and said kindly, "You may go now, Harry."

'Are you still not going to tell me, Dumbledore?' thought Harry in anger, and, oddly, slight disappointment. 'Haven't I proven that I'm capable in defending myself?'

"Or do you have anything you wish to tell me, Harry," asked Dumbledore.

"No, sir," said Harry coolly. "I'd better get going, sir."

Standing up, Harry nodded at the headmaster, then at Snape, who was eyeing him with narrowed eyes, before leaving the office.

'After all I've been through, you still think I'm a kid,' he thought when he closed the door behind him. 'You may be a good leader, Dumbledore, but you can never be a capable professor. In favor of your so-called higher purpose, you've forgotten the most important job of a teacher - to guide and help students. You've neglected those you should care about, and that is why you've lost Tom Riddle.'
Severus was fuming as he stormed back to his quarters. Potter had been lying boldly in the headmaster's office.

Despite what Albus had said, Severus was sure that Potter was a Legilimens. How else could the brat view his memory? And of all memories he had come across, it had to be that particular one.

As much as Severus wanted to hex the boy with cruciatus, he sensed that something was off. If Potter learning two kinds of dark magic without anyone noticing was any good indicator, Severus knew he would have to keep a closer eye on the boy.

He thought back at Potter's little show in Albus' office. He must admit Potter's behavior was almost Slyth-

Severus shook his head. What was he thinking? Potter? Slytherin?

The first Quidditch match of the year was held that Saturday. Harry did not realize how much he had missed flying until then. For Harry, he had not ridden on a broom for nearly a year, since he did not play seeker for Slytherin during his stay in the past.

"Mount your broom."

Harry did as he was told. A few feet opposite to him was Draco Malfoy, the Slytherin's seeker.

Harry stared at Malfoy, who refused to meet Harry's gaze, and wondered what the Slytherin was up to. Harry knew Malfoy would be initiated the next day, a piece of information that Harry had found out by Legilimency during the night-time discussion he had with Malfoy nearly a week ago. Would Malfoy really go to the meeting? Would he follow his father's footstep even if he didn't want to?

He was stirred out of his thought when he heard the whistle. He kicked off from the ground and shot up into the sky.

Fifteen minutes later, with Ron, Gryffindor's new keeper, losing the fifth goal in a row, Slytherin was now leading Gryffindor sixty points. Harry was hovering high above the pitch when he noticed Malfoy flying beside him.

Despite the circumstance, Harry knew if Malfoy was going to be marked tomorrow, this was probably his last chance to talk to the blonde.

Harry flew a bit nearer to the Slytherin's seeker. "Malfoy?"

"What, Potter?" said Malfoy, without looking up from his search of the snitch. "We are in a match, in case you've forgotten."

"Are you going to the meeting tomorrow?" asked Harry.

Malfoy's head jerked up at that. "How do you kn-" he stopped abruptly then glared at Harry. "Would you stop reading my mind, Potter? Or don't you understand what the meaning of 'privacy' is?" he hissed.

"I'm sorry," said Harry, truly meaning it. He knew how annoying it was when someone tried to invade his privacy. "But your emotion on that day was so strong that… any Legilimens could feel it."

Unconvinced, Malfoy continued to glare at him, though the anger in his eyes had somehow subsided.

"I am a Malfoy, and I don't plan to abandon that title any time soon." Malfoy turned away and pulled himself closer to his bloom. "But then, I am also a Slytherin. A Slytherin will always find a way to get what he wants."

With that said, Malfoy flew away to the other end of the Quidditch field, towards the…

Harry gasped and immediately speeded off after the Slytherin seeker. One would have thought, that with Umbridge here, it would be harder to wander around after curfew. It might be the case, if that toad woman had a smart enough mind to change her patrolling schedule once in a while. With the help of the Marauder's Map, it didn't take Harry long to figure out when he would be safe to roam the castle. For the past two weeks, Harry had been sneaking out to his personal training room after curfew, reading or practicing for an hour or two each night. So far, he had managed to finish the apparition section and reluctantly moved on the other part of his 'training'.

It was no different on Sunday night. Harry had slipped out of the dorm after Ron had fallen asleep. Tonight, though, he was unable to concentrate.

Earlier that night, he had seen from that Marauder's Map that Snape and Malfoy had disapparated near the Forbidden Forest.

Harry had tried his best to convince Malfoy but apparently that was not enough. Malfoy was still going to be a Death Eater.

That should not have bothered Harry that much, he had known from the beginning that the chance Malfoy would turn against his father's will was small, but why did he feel so… disappointed?

Harry sighed. If he couldn't even stop Malfoy from being a Death Eater, how could he possibly bring Tom back?

Harry rubbed his forehead and pocketed his wand. With all those disturbing thoughts in his mind, there was no way he could do any of those magics right, he might even get one or two curses backfired on him.

Severus stood with other masked Death Eaters in the graveyard. As Draco's godfather, he had the honor of watching the initiation. Several other Death Eaters were there as well, including Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy.

Draco was kneeling before the Dark Lord, head bowed.

"Bring out the girl," said Voldemort.

Soon a muggle girl was brought out before them. The test. Every new Death Eater had to prove themselves worthy. They had to torture, then murder, the assigned victims before being marked.

Draco shifted his eyes to the girl, who was crying and screaming loudly for her mum.

"You know what you should do, young Draco," said Voldemort coldly.

"Yes, My Lord," said Draco, his voice betraying no emotions.

Draco closed his eyes and paused for a long while. Then he reopened his eyes and pointed his wand at the girl in a swift motion.

"Avada Kedevra." The curse was said softly.

Green light emerged from Draco's wand and soon the screaming subsided.
Draco stared at the lifeless body of the girl he had just killed. What had he done?

"You should torture her, not kill her," came the Dark Lord's voice.

Draco fought against the sick feeling of his stomach and struggled to keep his body from trembling. He took a deep breath, then bowed down his head again.

"I am sorry, My Lord," he said through gritted teeth, but managed to keep his voice natural.

Draco had known about that particular test long ago, and had prepared himself physically and mentally before coming here. Apparently that was not enough…

The scene was so horrible. How could anyone possibly torture that girl even further? Hadn't they done enough to her? The only thing Draco could do for her was to end her pain.

But that was not a reason he could give to the Dark Lord. Draco decided to distract him before Voldemort could ask further questions.

"Do I pass the test, My Lord?"

"You had better obey my order next time, Draco," said Voldemort.

"Yes, My Lord," Draco answered obediently, still carefully avoiding the pair of crimson eyes.

"Now, raise your left arm," Voldemort rose from his throne-like seat.

Draco did as he was told, all the while fighting the urge to jump back as the snake-like figure loomed over him.

Draco rolled up his left sleeve slowly. He suppressed a shiver as the Dark Lord's wand contacted his skin. The Dark Lord muttered an incantation and severe pain immediately shot through Draco. The pain spread from his left forearm to his shoulder, then to his whole body. It was as if he was being hit by ten Cruciatus together. Draco's self-control slipped away quickly…

He screamed and clenched his forearm tightly, where a dark mark was permanently burned into the skin.
"I'll… be fine, Uncle Severus."

Severus grabbed the boy's shoulder as Draco attempted to go out of his office.

After the meeting, Severus somehow managed to bring the trembling boy back to Hogwarts. Severus knew from experience how painful

the marking process could be. He was surprised that Draco even managed to walk so shortly after receiving the Dark Mark.

"No, Draco, you are in no state to return to the dormitory," he said.

"I'm fine," Draco repeated. He smirked., "I'm… expected in the common room."

Severus sighed inwardly. Of course, the other Slytherins would be waiting for Draco to return from the Death Eater meeting. Draco was, after all, the first in his year to receive the mark.

"Of course," he said. "But take this at least." He handed a vial of pain-relieving potion to Draco, who drank it eagerly.

"Thank you, Uncle Severus," said Draco, already turning to the door. "See you tomorrow in lesson." With that said, his godson disappeared from the doorway.

Severus frowned. He knew Draco wanted to go back to the dormitory, but why did he have the feeling that Draco wanted to get away from him as quickly as possible? The boy seemed to be… afraid of him. No, not afraid, a Malfoy never knew the meaning of afraid. But why didn't Draco even look at Severus during their whole conversation? His godson practically stared at the floor for the whole time.

Pushing the questions aside, Severus went to give his report to Albus. Draco was assigned to keep a close watch on Potter. And most probably, the brat, as much an arrogant fool as his father, was totally oblivious to Draco's new position and the danger he was in.
Harry looked up as Malfoy went into the room. He studied the Slytherin cautiously. Malfoy was pale and looked shaken. His steps were unsteady and it looked as if every step took a huge effort for him.

Malfoy glanced at Harry, then dropped himself on a cushion, a hiss of pain escaped his mouth as he did so.

"Malfoy? Are you alright?" asked Harry.

"I'm fine," Malfoy answered swiftly.

Harry raised his eyebrows. He glanced at Malfoy's left fist, which was clutched so tightly that the knuckle turned white.

"Of course," he said sarcastically.

Malfoy glared at him, then sighed and leaned back to rest his head on the cushion.

Harry's Slytherin side told him to keep his distance from Malfoy, at least until Malfoy told him the reason for calling Harry to meet him here late at night.

Harry had given up trying to sleep after tossing and turning on his bed for more than an hour that night. He had gone down to the common room and had been writing his transfiguration essay when his fake galleon glowed warmly, telling Harry there was an HA meeting two hours later. And since Ron and Hermione had not come down from the dormitory, Harry knew the meeting was meant for him only. It had taken Harry no time to figure out who had set the time. The only thing that puzzled him was the reason of why Malfoy wanted to meet him.

"You know what happened, don't you? And yet you still came." Malfoy smirked. "Gryffindor to the end, Potter."

Harry shrugged. "I am a Gryffindor, I'm expected to act like one from time to time," he said.

Malfoy stared at Harry for a moment. Finally he said, "Half Gryffindor, at least. And half Slytherin."

Harry chuckled. That was quite true. But now was not the time to discuss which house Harry was meant to be.

"Why did you call me here, Malfoy?" he asked.

"Kidnap you for the Dark Lord, maybe?"

"And actually tell me that? No, I don't think that's the case," said Harry.

Malfoy sat up. "You told me to make my own choice," he started. "This is my choice." He looked into Harry's eyes. "I am a Malfoy, and I want to keep it that way, as I've told you before. That's what my life hinges on, and I'll lose everything if I don't follow my father's order and become a Death Eater."

"I… understand," said Harry quietly, trying to hide the disappointment from his voice.

"I thought I could just forget about what I want and simply do exactly what my father told me to. And I knew I could, before you interfered with my business," there was a hint of bitterness in Malfoy's voice as he said that. He shook his head. "I can't, Potter, not after what you've told me about choices. I just can't," said Malfoy, his voice was shaking. "I can't do what my father does. I…" Malfoy closed his eyes and said softly, "I am not a murderer."

"Malfoy…" Harry didn't know how to comfort the Slytherin.

"End this, Potter."

"What?" asked Harry.

"Kill that bastard and end the war." Malfoy clutched his fist and looked at Harry solemnly. "I can spy for you."
A/N: Sorry, I know it's been a long time, but I've been really busy with schoolwork, exams, etc. I'll try to update faster next time, hopefully before book 6 comes out.

By the way, this is the second version of chapter ten. My original version, i.e. the one I lost during a certain computer problem. Draco did not go to the Death Eater meeting in my original chapter. But then, when I re-typed the whole thing, I thought it would be more reasonable for Draco to attend the initiation. For Draco, the name Malfoy is what his life hinges on. He will lose everything if his father disowns him and he will do anything to keep that from happening. You'll see more about how Draco comes to his decision in the next chapter.

A-man: What 'History' means? Keep guessing.

fallenangel: No, I'm afraid Ginny will not be in this story. I like Ginny, but I don't want to make the plot more complicated than it is now.

Schneeleopard: No, Dumbledore doesn't know Harry was in the past. He knows there's one student called Alex, but he doesn't know Harry and Alex are the same.

zzlostdreamerzz: Have Tom send Harry a letter written in Parseltongue delivered by Draco? Good idea. But Voldie can always contact Harry through their connection if he wants. And please note the 'if he wants'.

Badita: Sirius may appear, but… Well, just read on.

AzureKita: Let's just say Dumbledore was wary of Tom. As a Legilimens, he could easily sense Tom's hatred. As for the other questions, you may find out the answers later.

Again, thanks for Irihi Safaia and all the reviewers! Don't forget to review!

Chapter 11: An Ally

Draco looked up when the gargoyle's statue jumped aside to reveal Albus Dumbledore.

"Mr. Malfoy?" Dumbledore seemed surprised to see Draco there.

"I wish to talk to you in private, headmaster," said Draco.

Dumbledore regarded him with curiosity, then gestured Draco to the staircase. "Come in."

Draco ensured his Occlumency shield was in place before he followed Dumbledore to his office.

"How can I help you, Mr. Malfoy?" asked Dumbledore after Draco had seated himself.

"I want to be a spy," said Draco simply.

Dumbledore's eyes widened. "A spy?"

Malfoy nodded. "I've been marked recently, as I'm sure you know, but I don't want to be a Death Eater."

Dumbledore looked thoughtful. "Why don't you want to be a Death Eater, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco wanted to tell Dumbledore that it was none of his business, but held his tongue. It would do him no good to make Dumbledore even more suspicious of him. So he answered truthfully instead.

"I don't want to be a killer like my father," he said as calmly as he could. "Those muggle kids have done nothing wrong, but the Death Eaters killed them in cold blood without a second thought. It's just... disgusting. And they even took pleasure in hearing those muggles scream during torture sessions. I… don't want to be like them," said Draco.

Dumbledore stared at him and immediately Draco felt the familiar sensation of someone trying to invade his mind.

"Memories can be faked, headmaster," he stressed Dumbledore's title with a hint of sarcasm. "You can test me with Veritaserum, but I have to be the one who sets the questions."

Dumbledore smiled. "So you are trained," he said. "Yes, memories can be faked, but nothing can deceive a phoenix's feeling."

Draco was startled when a phoenix flew towards him. He had noticed that phoenix when he entered the office, and guessed that it must be Dumbledore's pet. To his amazement, the phoenix soon perched itself on his shoulder.

Dumbledore's smiled widened, his eyes twinkling annoyingly. "This is Fawkes, young Malfoy."

Draco didn't know what to do with a phoenix on his shoulder. Hesitantly, he petted the phoenix cautiously and let it fly back to its stool.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"Fawkes will know if you've been lying," said Dumbledore.

Draco simply nodded.

Dumbledore studied him for a while, then said, "Being a spy is dangerous, young Malfoy. It will be safer for you if you stop going to the meetings instead. You will be protected here."

"I'm not a child," said Draco coldly. "I don't need protection. I want to help, and you need more than one spy."

Dumbledore looked up sharply.

"Yes, I know Professor Snape is a spy," said Draco.

"How?" inquired Dumbledore.

"I have my way. Don't worry, neither I nor my source will report it to the Dark Lord," said Draco. "But we are talking about me being a spy, headmaster."

Dumbledore frowned slightly, then sighed.

"Yes, we do need another spy," he said. "If being a spy is your choice, I think you can cooperate with Professor Snape and assist him in spying on the Dark Lord. I will talk to him about this and ask him to tell you what you should do."

Draco nodded and dismissed himself quickly.

As Draco was on his way back to the dungeons, he thought back at the sudden turn of events that lead him to his current position.

Draco's original intention had been to spy for Potter, but Potter had turned down his proposal rather quickly, with a vague reason.

"I can spy for you."

Potter stiffened. "What?"

"Remember what I told you on the Qudditch match that day?" asked Draco.

"A Slytherin will always find a way to get what he wants," Potter quoted him softly.

"I can't make the choice. Being disowned by my father or killing others for my father, so I… choose a way in between," said Draco.

Potter looked uneasy. "You should talk to Dumbledore," he said.

Draco snorted. "I may not be loyal to the Dark Lord, but that doesn't mean I am loyal to that old fool," he said.

"But-"

"Father told me Dumbledore has been manipulating you, trying to mould you into a perfect symbol of the light and a weapon to kill the Dark Lord," said Draco. "He has been keeping information from you."

"I know… and I'm not saying I trust him. He's been keeping too much from me, I have no reason to continue trusting him," said Potter, "but that's… not the point."

Draco frowned. He couldn't understand why Potter seemed so anxious.

Potter rubbed his forehead, an act Draco discovered was a sign of anxiety. "Dumbledore and I are… on a different road. We both want to stop to war, but with a different way. Only Dumbledore can make full use of your information."

Draco was further puzzled by Potter's behavior. "A different road? What do you mean?"

Potter stared at Draco, as if trying to judge whether to answer Draco or not. Draco did not like that look at all.

"You'll find out soon enough," said Potter finally, "if I am to teach you how to guard your mind."

Draco had been quite reluctant in accepting Potter's offer. Having civil conversation with Potter was one thing, but letting Potter teach him was an entire different matter. Though in the end, Draco was glad that he had let down his pride once and allowed Potter to help him, otherwise Draco would have been dead by now. Draco had been summomed two days after he had finally learned Legilimency. It would have been impossible for him to manage guarding his mind had Draco chosen to learn on his own.

After Draco had mastered Occlumency and moved on to learning Legilimency, Potter had reluctantly agreed to lower his mental shield for Draco to learn to invade another's mind easier. Therefore Draco

had learned much more about The-Boy-Who-Lived than he wanted over the past four weeks. But of course, that went both ways; Potter had also viewed quite a number of Draco's private memories during their training sessions. And their relationship had kind of evolved into a tentative friendship through the sharing of memories.

Draco had been surprised to find out about Potter having such a childhood. The way the Dursleys treated Potter was unacceptable. He had even broken down in laughter when he saw Hagrid giving Potter's cousin a pig tail. How suiting. What Potter had said after that was not that hilarious though…

"Do you know why I didn't shake your hand that day on the train?" asked Potter casually.

Draco's face darkened. He was still angry with Potter for denying his friendship that day.

"Guess who you reminded me of with the way you act?" said Potter lightly.

Potter's statement managed to make Draco speechless.

Yet the shock of finding out Potter's home life was nothing compared to that when Draco found out what Potter meant by 'a different road than Dumbledore's'.

"Let's try again," said Potter.

Draco cleared his mind, then pointed his wand at Potter.

"Legilimens!"

Potter sitting in a dark room, eyeing something glowing brightly in the dark… An old man pointing at some colorful stones in a cabinet, talking eagerly… The old man pointed his wand at Potter. Potter looked into a mirror, watching his feature changed in fascination… Potter, in his disguise, put on the sorting hat and the hat yelled 'Slytherin' loudly…

Draco found himself being pushed out of Potter's mind.

Before Draco could say anything, Potter said, "So you finally come across that one." He sighed. "Well, I promise I'll tell you, so…"

Draco frowned. "What do you mean? And what's that I saw in your mind? You-"

Potter held up his hand to stop Draco's questioning.

"There's still more," said Potter. "Try the spell again, Malfoy, I'll direct you to several specific memories this time."

Confused, Draco did as he was told.

"Legilimens!"

A dark haired boy who looked similar to Potter was sitting idly under a tree, waving his wand in the air to move some flying alphabets around… The same boy standing in front of a door with Potter, still in disguise, and with a mock bow opened the door to reveal a large room, the HA room. The boy laughed heartedly at Potter, who was looking at him in disbelief…

Draco watched several more memories, all concerning Potter and the mysterious boy, who was a Slytherin and was obviously a good friend of Potter, before he was pushed out of Potter's mind again.

"Time travel," said Potter before Draco could ask any question. "This summer I found a magical stone that sent me back in time. I lost my memory and spent a year in the past."

"What?" Draco stared at Potter, dumbfounded. "Time travel?"

Potter nodded. "When I came back, no time had actually passed, so no one even knew I'd been gone for a year."

"You were sorted into Slytherin?" That was the first question that came into Draco's mind.

Potter chuckled. "What? You of all people should know how Slytherin I can be," he answered in amusement.

"Are you… serious, Potter?" said Draco. "You are telling me you've spent a year in the past, sorted in Slytherin, came back after a year and no one ever found out?"

Potter nodded, his eyes dancing with amusement, obviously at Draco's reaction.

Draco considered what Potter had just told him. That was… too far-fetched to be a fake story. Potter was too Slytherin to make up a story like that to deceive Draco. Besides, that would be a perfect, though outrageous, explanation to Potter's sudden change this year.

"Who's that kid?" he asked. Then something clicked. "He's that 'friend of yours' that you've mentioned so many times, isn't he? The one who found all those secret rooms."

Potted nodded, a sad looked passed his eyes. "Yes, that's him," he said. He stared at Draco closely, hesitated, then continued, "His name is Tom Riddle."

Draco frowned. "Riddle?" he said. "He's not a pureblood, is he?"

Potter blinked, as if he didn't expect this kind of reaction from Draco. "No, he's not a pureblood, that's why most Slytherins hated him at that time." He eyed Draco oddly. "Haven't you heard of his name?"

"No. Why?" asked Draco.

Potter rubbed his forehead. "Do you recognize his wand?" he asked slowly.

His wand? Draco tried to picture the boy's wand in his mind. The shape. The color. It did look familiar… Then Draco felt his blood turned cold as he remembered where he had seen the wand before…

"Now, raise your left arm."

Draco rolled up his sleeve and tried desperately to stop himself from wincing as the Dark Lord pressed his wand onto his skin.

Draco gasped and stared at Potter with wide eyes.

Potter nodded in confirmation.

"Tom Marvolo Riddle," Potter said, writing out the name in the air with his wand as he did so.

He glanced at Draco, then, with a look of resignation in his eyes, waved his wand at the hovering letters.

The letters rearranged themselves and Draco had a dread feeling as four words began to form before him.

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

The boy in Potter's memory… Voldemort… The Dark Lord… and…Potter had called him 'friend'…

Potter had told him more about his time travel trip after that, and his relation with the young Dark Lord… or Tom, as Potter had insisted many times that 'Tom' was not a Dark Lord the time he met him.

Draco had been surprised to know how defensive Potter was of the Dark Lord and that Potter still considered the Dark Lord his friend.

"He's a Dark Lord, Potter. A sadistic bastard," said Draco, remembering what had happened when he was initiated.

Potter glared at him. "Don't call him that," he said.

"He tried to kill you, remember?"

"I know. And he's the one who kill my parents," said Potter "But Tom's my friend… I can never hurt him," he sighed and hung his head.

Draco admitted that he couldn't understand how Potter could still consider such a bastard friend, especially since said friend had been

trying to kill him for years. But then, it was not as if Draco knew that much about friendship anyway. He hardly had any friends in Slytherin. All his so-called friends were assigned to accompany him because he was a Malfoy. Though he would never admit it aloud, especially not to Potter, Potter was probably the first person that Draco could truly call friend.

Draco might not understand why, but he knew how important friendship was to Potter. Potter had always treasured his friends, Draco had known that for a long time from the way Potter cared for Weasel and Granger. And as Draco became closer to Potter this year, he could tell that Potter even cared for him, when they had been despising each other since the first day of school. So Draco knew there was no way Potter could ever hurt his friends, let alone kill them.

So Draco had gone on to ask Potter what he planned to do, and that was when he realized how insane Potter was.

"What?" Draco stared at Potter in disbelief. "It's-"

"Insane," Potter finished it for him. "I know. But it's worth a try."

"Worth a try?" said Draco. "Honestly, Potter. To redeem the Dark Lord? That's just… crazy!"

"I don't care," muttered Potter. "Tell me I'm acting like a reckless Gryffindor or whatever, I have to try. I believe in Tom. I know there's still good in him," Potter said with determination.

"Stubborn idiot," Draco muttered. "You'll get yourself killed!"

"Maybe," said Potter. "But I can never kill him, so… I guess I'm going to die either way."

Draco frowned. "What do you mean? You are going to die either way?"

Potter shrugged. "Forget it," he said, waving his hand. He looked back at Draco. "That's why I don't need you to spy for me," he said.

"The road I have chosen is for me alone. No one else can help me. I'm sorry."

Draco was surprised to hear Potter apologizing to him. "Potter…"

"Talk to Dumbledore," Potter continued. "I'm sure he'll know how to help you."

Draco was about to protest when Potter interrupted.

"He is the only one who can help you, and you know that."

Draco had no choice but to admit that Potter was right. From the turn of events, it was obvious that it would be pointless for Draco to spy for Potter.

Draco sighed. For the first time in his life, he was worried about someone other than himself. He was actually worried about Harry Potter of all people. Potter had asked him to help him with something… and Draco had been so shocked with what Potter had asked him to do that he had even considered telling someone. But somehow, he didn't want to break Potter's trust. Besides, there was actually no one he could pass on the information to. Dumbledore was out of question. Potter might be insane, but Dumbledore was both insane and manipulative. Draco would never side with that old fool. Since his godfather was spying for Dumbledore, he couldn't tell Severus as well. Telling his father would be pointless as well since his father would most probably pass the information to the Dark Lord, who knew exactly what had happened.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. With Potter taking his own side, he couldn't help wondering how the war between light and dark would turn out.

It was the night two days before the beginning of Christmas holidays when Draco was summoned again. He hesitated, then, sighing in resignation, he took out his fake alleon and set the time to contact Potter.

"That's all for my report, My Lord." Severus bowed down from his kneeling position before the Dark Lord.

The Dark Lord nodded. "Go back to Hogwarts and report to me any news of the old fool."

"Yes, My Lord."

"You are dismissed."

Severus frowned behind his mask. Dismissed? But the meeting was not over yet. He swallowed. So the Dark Lord was suspicious of him.

He bowed again and kissed the hem of the Dark Lord's robe. He got up then walked towards the edge of the apparation ward. Just before he apparated away, he caught a glimpse of a cloaked figure walking out of the shadows and towards the Dark Lord.

He walked slowly out of his hiding place towards the crowd of Death Eaters, face hidden by his hood, eyes focusing on the one sitting high before all of him, Voldemort.

Almost immediately as he walked out, he was at the wand point of nearly every assembled Death Eater. He held up his hands in a gesture of peace. He looked up at the Dark Lord, who was watching him with narrowed eyes.

"Who are you?" accused one of the Death Eater.

He raised his hand and lowered his hood to reveal his face.

Several gasps were heard followed by his action.

"Harry Potter," said the earlier Death Eater, raising his wand in an attack stance.

"Lucius," a hissing voice stop Lucius Malfoy's action and silenced every other Death Eater.

Voldemort stared at Harry with his crimson eyes, pointing his own wand at him.

"Potter," he said with a cold voice. "What are you doing here?"

Harry's eyes kept on the man who was once his friend. He lowered himself slowly to a kneeling position.

"I am here to join you."

A/N: Finally I've reached this part. Next chapter will be, obviously, about the meeting of Harry and Tom. I just can't wait writing it! But I'll wait until I've finished reading HBP first.

SBR: No, Draco didn't know Snape is a spy until Harry told him.

xxlostdreamerxz: Thanks for the idea, but no, I don't think so. There's not much to tell after the ending of this one. But of course, I can't say for sure, there are several possible endings and I still haven't decided which one I'm going to use.

Amayaris: You have to wait and see what Snape's up to.

The game? Gryffindor, of course, from what I see, Harry is definitely a better seeker than Draco.

By the way, sorry I still haven't replied your mail. I'm busy getting this out before HBP.

InsolventDarkTazz: Here you've got another Harry/Tom interaction. As for ships, there will be no pairing in this fic.

Again, thanks for Irihi Safaia and all reviewers! Have fun reading book six and don't forget to review!

Chapter 12: Repeating History

"You want to join me?" Voldemort's cold voice broke through the silence that followed Harry's statement.

Harry took a deep breath. "Yes," he said as steadily as he could manage.

Green eyes met red eyes. Harry winced involuntarily at Voldemort's appearance. The difference between Voldemort and young Tom Riddle was so huge that no one could ever imagine them being the same person. Harry felt his heart beat rising to an alarming rate when Voldemort finally spoke again.

"Why?" Voldemort's quiet voice betrayed no emotion, his wand still pointing directly at the kneeling Harry.

"Does it really matter?" said Harry softly. "I am loyal to you and you know I am not lying." He looked into the pair of crimson eyes and lowered his Occlumency shield. "Won't it be a great boast to your side?"

Voldemort narrowed his eyes. "What are you planning, Potter?"

"I told you I'd find a way to reach you," said Harry, "I'm merely trying to fulfill my promise."

From the connection he shared with Voldemort, Harry felt a flick of emotion, though it disappeared almost immediately.

"My Lord," Lucius Malfoy chose that moment to speak up, "The boy-"

Voldemort flicked his wand towards Malfoy and the blond Death Eater was twitching in pain on the floor before Harry could blink.

Harry swallowed. A non-verbal Cruciatus Curse. Cast easily and casually as if it was nothing.

Voldemort stopped the curse after a while and pointed his wand back to Harry, his gaze never left Harry once. Voldemort stood up and took

a few steps forward. Harry held his breath, but refused to look away from the advancing figure. From his position, he could be killed easily at any moment. Yet he stayed, kneeling in front of the man who killed his parents and wanted him dead ever since his birth, the same man who was whom his best friend had become.

From the corner of his eyes, Harry saw Lucius Malfoy stumble back to the Death Eaters' circle. Every single Death Eater seemed to have held their breath, not daring to make any noise. The Cruciatus Curse was a clear warning that no one was to interfere.

Voldemort stopped directly in front of Harry, pointing the wand Harry had seen so many times in the past between Harry's eyes.

"Do not lie to me, Harry Potter. You do not want to join me," he hissed dangerously.

"Tell the truth, or I will kill you now."

"The truth?" said Harry softly. "Do you really want to know?" He looked into Voldemort's eyes and called out one past memory.

"Why are you coming down here? That's suicide!" said a young Tom Riddle.

"I don't know why," said Harry. "I just... well, the only thing in my mind when I was standing before the entrance was that I wanted to save you. And if I wanted to drag you out of here at least I needed to jump down myself."

Tom stared at him in disbelief. "You're mental!"

"Well, maybe I am mental," said Harry. "But that is my motive-"

"Crucio!" Voldemort's bellowed.

Harry braced himself for the pain and blinked as nothing happened after the curse had hit him. Several Death Eaters gasped. Harry widened his eyes in realization and pulled out his now glowing

necklace. He had never thought the protective power of the amulet was strong enough to block an unforgivable.

"Do you recognize this," he asked Voldemort. "Ironic, isn't?"

Voldemort's expression remained unreadable, but Harry, from the connection they shared, knew that Voldemort was confused at his own feeling. He did not like confusion at all though, so he reflexively attacked the person that caused it by an offensive means. Before Harry could further analyze the feeling he felt through his scar, the new emotions disappeared quickly with no trace left, replaced by the usual hatred and suspicion.

Harry sighed inwardly. Was there any chance for him to overcome the darkness of such intensity?

Voldemort stared at him piercingly. A sadistic smile slowly formed over his snake-like feature.

"Avery!" he snapped suddenly. "Bring Jones out."

Voldemort lowered his wand and took a few steps backwards, clearing a space between Harry and himself.

"Then let's see if you've got what it takes to be a Death Eater, Potter," he said.

A movement behind him caught Harry's attention. He turned and caught his breath at the sight of the witch brought out by Nott. He could not remember her name, but he was certain that the witch was one of the Order members that had come to fetch Harry from the Dursleys' to the Order headquarter.

Jones appeared to have been tortured. Severely tortured. She was so weak that Nott needed to half-drag her before Voldemort.

"Ah, Hestia Jones," said Voldemort, giving her a horrible smile. "Are you enjoying your stay?"

She spat. "Kill me, you bastard."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes, then shifted his gaze back to Harry.

"Kill her," he said simply.

Jones turned, her eyes widened when she finally noticed Harry. She was as surprised as Harry when she saw him, and what seemed to be fear crossed her face, though she managed to recover from her shock within seconds.

"Run, Potter," she said under her breath. "Run when I distract him."

Harry took in a sharp breath. She thought he was captured? And she feared for him… not for herself.

Harry shook his head. "I-"

Gritting his teeth, Harry lifted his wand and pointed at the weakened witch shakily.

"What- Potter?" Jones looked startled, and confused.

Harry hesitated.

"Kill her," Voldmort repeated.

Harry had known it would come to this. He thought he could do it, but no… Killing spiders and killing a person was totally different, especially when the person had been trying to save his life, regardless of her own.

He shook his head. He couldn't do it. He knew even if he managed to bring himself to utter the incantation, the curse would not work for lack of intention.

"It seems we've made it clear, haven't we, Potter?" Voldemort smirked. He must have felt Harry's desperation. "You have no place here."

Harry tightened his grip on his wand, his hand still shaking violently. He tried to convince himself that no matter if he did it or not, the witch was going to die anyway; he even tried to manipulate his mind with Legilimency, but all to no avail. He simply did not have any the inclination to kill. But Voldemort did, could he…

He closed his eyes in concentration. He reached out to Voldemort's mind, then came to a stop at the Dark Lord's Occlumency shield. He could not reach out any further, but that was enough. Occlumency could not block feelings and emotions. Through the bond they shared, Voldemort knew exactly how Harry was feeling, and vice versa. Except for the few times Harry managed to provoke the long hidden memories in Voldemort's mind, he could not feel much emotions coming from the Dark Lord other then hatred, or sometimes annoyance.

He focused on all those negative emotions coming from Voldemort. His hatred and his will to kill…

"Avada Kedevra," Harry uttered the curse quietly.

He shivered when power passed from the body to his wand, then transformed into a bright green flash that shot towards the broken witch, who was staring at him with disbelief and… betrayal in her eyes.

Harry shut his eyes as the curse hit Jones in her chest. When he opened his eyes again, he could only see the witch's unmoving body on the ground.

His whole body was trembling. His wand arm fell back lamely to his side. What had he done? He felt as if his soul was being torn apart.

He heard someone drew in a sharp breath from above him and looked up weakly. There stood Voldemort, staring down at him. For a short moment, Harry thought he saw an odd gleam in the pair of crimson eyes. Did Voldemort feel what Harry had felt?

"Have I… proved myself, then?" he asked weakly.

What seemed like hours had passed before Voldemort responded. He stepped forward and grabbed Harry's left arm. He pulled back the sleeve but stopped after he had bared Harry's left forearm.

On the pale skin were many deep red scars, lined in perfect pattern of a Chimaera's dentition across Harry's forearm. It was a mark that only Alex Salutor and Tom Riddle could understand.

Voldemort stared at the scars for some time, then gritted his teeth and grabbed Harry's arm tighter. He looked back at Harry.

"Cling to your childish hope if you want, Potter," said Voldemort in a merciless voice. "But if you betray me, I will make sure you will get more then these little scars of yours."

Voldemort passed his wand on Harry's arm. Within seconds, pain shot through Harry. He shut his eyes tight and screamed. The pain was so much that it made the Cruciatus Curse feel like nothing.

He didn't know how long he had stayed twitching and screaming, but when the pain had finally subsided enough for him to regain some control over his body, Harry found himself panting heavily on the wet ground, his hand clenched tightly over the burning Dark Mark on his arm. Pushing himself from the ground with the little strength that left in him, he kneeled before Voldemort again.

Harry knew what he was required to do next. Death Eaters used to kiss the hem of Voldemort's robe in a gesture of submission.

He leaned forward weakly, pushing his Gryffindor pride and thoughts of what his parents would think of him right now aside, and attempted to kiss the hem of the black robe, but the robe was pulled away from him abruptly the moment he touched it.

"That's enough!" hissed Voldemort, taking a step backwards, again eyeing Harry with that odd gleam in his eyes. "Stay at Hogwarts for now, Potter, until I summon you again."

"Yes-" Harry stopped at mid-sentence. Another memory surfaced.

"Lord!" Tom laughed out. "I'm not that ambitious. I don't want to become a lord or something."

"But are you telling me you want to insert four more letters in the name? That'd be awfully long," said Harry, pointing at the flying alphabets. "Besides, I like the name Voldemort."

"So do I," said Tom.

"Lord Voldemort, then." Harry grinned. "What say you, My Lord?" he added playfully.

Tom flinched. He shot Harry a glare. "Don't you ever call me that. It makes me uncomfortable."

Harry lowered his head, then added softly, "My Lord."

A/N: So, how do you feel about the meeting between Harry and Voldemort? Sorry for the short chapter, but this seems to be the right place to stop.

japanese-jew is right, This is foreseen. Take a look at the last few chapters of Learn from the History and you'll find out what I mean by history repeating itself.

As JKR's Tom Riddle is so different from mine, there's no way I can change the plot to fit HBP. So, I have no choice but to ignore several major details we learned in book six, including Tom's past and a certain secret of Snape.

As for my problem with Snape… Well, I don't think I can like him again as I used to, but at least that scene on the tower did not popped up in my mind anymore whenever I read or write about him.

Anyway, again, thank you for all reviewers and Irihi Safaia for editing this for me.

Amayaris: Yes, Draco's the reason Harry knew when and where the meeting was held. He didn't know this was what Harry's planning though. You'll see his reaction in the next chapter, which is… definitely not pleasant.

Sylvia Snape: Sorry for the spelling mistake, I've already corrected it.

SBR: Yes, Draco's in the crowd and he'll most definitely kill Harry for it ;P

kabab: Snape's not there, he's dismissed before Harry came out from his hiding place.

zatusik: Yes, book six is published. As for who died, I'm sure you can find the answer from some post HBP fics out there. I'm not going to spoil it here.

KatSakura: Tom already knew that Harry is Alex. Harry has told him during their mind conversation.

Enelen: How many chapters? Honestly, I'm not sure. I know where this is going, more or less, but I don't know the exact number of chapters I'm going to write. Six or seven more I guess?

Please Review!

Chapter 13: Aftermath

It wasn't until Harry followed the other Death Eaters out of the unknown graveyard that what he had done finally hit him full force. He was trembling uncontrollably. Pain radiated from the Dark Mark and, added with the pain of killing someone, nearly suffocated Harry. He was close to collapse when he finally walked past the apparition ward.

He knew he could not make it back to Hogwarts. He did not have enough energy to apparate, let alone deal with…

He glanced at the Death Eater that stood next to Lucius Malfoy. A pair of enraged grey eyes stared back dangerously behind the white mask.

He shook his head to clear away the dizziness and slipped his hand into his robe pocket. Upon touching the smooth surface of the stone hidden in it, he whispered the incantation with the little strength left in him.

Nicolas Flamel was resting near the fireplace when Harry Potter materialized in the middle of his living room.

"Harry?" he kneeled down next the boy. "What happened?"

A look at the boy told Nicolas something was wrong. Harry was leaning against the wall, shaking violently. His face was pale, sweat rolling down from his forehead. His eyes were shut and… he was clutching his left forearm tightly.

Yes, something was seriously wrong indeed…

He helped to boy to the couch. Waving his wand, he summoned several vials of potions from his lab.

"What have you done, child?" he whispered softly as sat down next to Harry, raising a vial of pain relieving potion to the boy's lips.

The boy was clearly drained. He just sat there, eyes closed, while Nicolas poured the potions down his throat.

"Harry?"

Harry slowly opened his eyes.

"Nicolas…"

"How do you feel?" asked Nicolas.

"Better… physically, at least," Harry added after hesitation. He lowered his head, staring at a spot on his covered left arm, where Nicolas knew was burnt a Dark Mark. "I… I went-" He shook his head and looked up at Nicolas uncertainly.

"I know," said Nicolas, knowing what Harry was trying to tell him.

Harry nodded. He lowered his gaze. "I'm sorry," he said softly.

Nicolas stared at Harry wordlessly, not really knowing what to make of Harry's action.

"What were you thinking?" he said at last. "Do you know how dangerous it is?"

Harry cringed. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "But…" He shook his head. "I… I though you'd understand," he muttered.

Nicolas' heart cringed at his young charge's word. Yes, he did consider Harry his charge. He was responsible for Harry's trip in time and was probably the one who could understand the boy's situation most. But he was worried, and could not avoid accusing the child for putting himself in danger.

What Harry had done was unexpected. He had never thought Harry would go so far as to join Tom. But maybe he shouldn't be surprised. This child was remarkable. His determination and his capability to love never ceased to amaze him. And it was these qualities that had

convinced Albus that Harry would, one day, defeat Voldemort and put a stop to the ever-lasting war.

Albus believed Tom should be killed, though Nicolas chose to believe otherwise. He had tried, before the raise of Voldemort, to pull Tom back, but their different stances in the war had made it impossible. Now Harry had chosen to join Tom's side. The boy had chosen to redeem Voldemort, and there was only one way to do so. Nicolas glanced at the lightning shaped scar of Harry's forehead. He could more or less figure out the boy's plan. It was a plan only Harry could carry out.

But Harry was still a child. A child with so many burdens on his shoulders. A child whose heart had just been tortured mercilessly.

"I do understand, my child," he said, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder gently. "But I'm worried. It's not an easy way."

"I know," said Harry. He shut his eyes; Nicolas knew he was remembering whatever happened earlier that night. When Harry spoke again, he voice was trembling. "I… I don't even know if it's the right way. It… it felt so wrong."

Nicolas pulled the shaking boy towards him, holding him when the wall blocking his emotions finally broke down. Harry buried his face in his robe, clinging to him for comfort.

"I killed her, Nicolas…" he croaked. "I killed a person…"

Nicolas held him close, patting his back gently.

"Look what you've done to your only friend, Tom," he muttered softly, staring out into the endless night.

Potter was in pain, he could feel it through their… connection. He had tried to strengthen his Occlumency shield, but nothing seemed to be able to block the emotions coming through from Potter's side of the link.

Voldemort paced around his quarters in anger. The strong emotions he was experiencing from Potter were something he had not felt for a long time. The guilt for killing someone. The fear of rejection by others. The doubt and helplessness. The emotions were so strong that it was as if Voldemort was feeling them himself.

Something within him started to stir, responding to those emotions. Voldemort did not know what that strange feeling was, but it made him feel insecure and he did not like that feeling at all.

But something else was causing him to be so restless, and it was caused by the same source: Harry Potter. What was it that he had felt when Potter called him "My Lord"? Why had he felt so uncomfortable to Potter's submissive behavior? Wasn't it great to have Dumbledore's golden boy kneeling before him? That brat had come to him in an attempt to search for the vulnerable boy that had ceased to exist long ago. But that didn't matter, did it?

Voldemort tensed as another wave of Potter's agony flew through him. Potter was by no means a worthy Death Eater, if the massive guilt he was now feeling from the boy was any indicator. He would let the boy live for now, he could be a useful tool against the light side after all, and he could kill him at any moment if Potter dared to betray him. Besides, it was satisfactory to see the boy suffer… or was it?

Voldemort gritted his teeth and pushed away his doubt in an instant. The emotions of Potter were clouding his mind, but he would not let it affect him, which was most probably the boy's plan. Let Potter cling to his hope if he wanted. Potter had given him a great advantage by turning, and that was what mattered most. Sooner than he had planned, he could alert the wizarding public of his return, and no one, not even Dumbledore, would be able to stop him this time.

On the other side of the dark quarters, a pair of slit-like eyes followed the Dark Lord's movement as he paced around the room.

Her master was clearly disturbed, and she knew better than to bother him at a time like this. She had been with her master in the meeting just now, as she always was, and what she saw was a pleasant surprise.

She had seen him once last year, but she had not been sure since her other master had looked so different, and his current master had expressed his dislike of him quite clearly. She had thought if her master hated the boy, than it was impossible for the boy to be her other master, until tonight when she saw him again.

She was sure now that he was indeed her Master Alex. What she didn't understand is why her master seemed to have hated him for years, and even hurt him last year. She didn't know what had happened in the meeting just now when Master Alex suddenly appeared, but something must have passed through between her master and Master Alex unnoticed and it was disturbing her master greatly.

Master Alex had asked her to take care of her current master nearly fifty years ago and she had done her best not to fail Master Alex. She had been there with her master for a long time and had witnessed many things that her master had done. She knew those were things that Master Alex would not be approve of, but she had no power to interfere with her master's business, and had learned to accept it soon after her master had renounced the name 'Tom'.

Did Master Alex think she had failed him? She was uncertain. But she was pleased that Master Alex had chosen to join her master. She could not bear to see her two masters fighting against each other, as she had come to love both of them so much. And soon, she would have a chance to meet her Master Alex again.

"Umbridge will soon find out I've left," said Harry, pushing himself from the couch. "I have to go back."

Nicolas frowned, concerned at the child's state, both physical and mental. Harry had just barely managed to calm down several minutes ago.

"I'll manage," said Harry, seeing Nicolas' hesitation, though his weak voice contradicted his own statement.

Nicolas sighed. He didn't want to leave Harry alone at a moment like this, but Harry was right, he had to go back before Dolores Umbridge got suspicious. The last thing they needed now was the involvement of the Ministry; things were complicated as they were.

He summoned a vial of Dreamless Sleep potion and handed it to Harry, who recognized it immediately.

Harry smiled at him weakly. "Thanks. I certainly need this tonight."

"You need a good rest," said Nicolas

Harry looked down at his feet and muttered something not audible to Nicolas.

"What is it, child?"

"I don't think I deserve it," Harry repeated quietly.

Nicolas sighed. "Harry…"

"What if it's really not the right way?" Harry continued, looking up. "What if I'm merely just helping the dark side and causing more death?"

Nicolas squeezed the boy's shoulder gently and looked into the pair of emerald eyes that were now filled with guilt and doubt.

"Believe in your choice, child. It is not an easy road, but you have to have faith in yourself, and Tom," he said. "I know there is still hope for Tom and I will be with you no matter how it ends, my child."

Harry stared at him in silence, different emotions passed through his eyes. Then the boy smiled and gave him a hug.

"Thank you, Nicolas."

Nicolas smiled. "Remember you can always come to me if you need help," he said.

Harry nodded. He walked towards the front door and was about to leave when he stopped again. He turned around.

"You won't tell Dumbledore, will you?" he asked uncertainly.

Nicolas sighed. "Albus cares about you, Harry," he said. "You shouldn't treat him this way."

Harry looked away. "He keeps everything from me."

"Albus wants to protect you." Knowing what Harry was thinking, Nicolas added, "You may not understand it at the moment, but he does care for you a lot, more than the order and even more than the war. He doesn't want you to be involved in the war so soon, he wants you to be happy, Harry."

Harry remained silent. Nicolas shook his head at the stubbornness of the boy.

"Albus will not be pleased with this news," he said, referring to Harry's earlier question. "I suppose it would be best if we leave him out of this at the moment," he said slowly, choosing his words carefully. Noticing Harry's sigh of relief, he continued, "But you should tell him at some point, Harry. He deserves to know what has happened."

Harry grunted in response, causing Nicolas to chuckle.

"Do you want me to accompany you out?" he asked.

Harry shook his head. "I'll be fine," he said. "Thanks for helping me, Nicolas. I wouldn't know what to do otherwise."

Nicolas smiled. "Don't forget you can always ask for help here."

Harry gave him a wave, before disappearing out the door.

Since using the Portkey stone would bring him back to the place where he had been originally - in this case that would be the unknown place where the Death Eater meeting had been held - Harry had to apparate back to Hogwarts instead of using the stone. He walked until he was outside Nicolas' apparation wards. He closed his eyes in concentration, focusing on his destination. Then, with a sudden spin, he disapparated.

Once he got back on his feet, Harry looked around and sighed in relief. So far, he had only tried apparating such a long distance twice. He had not had much chance to practice, since there were anti-apparation wards all around Hogwarts. The only place for practice Harry could find was the place he was currently in. The long secret passage linking Honey Dukes' to the hump-backed witch statue. It was the only place long enough for him to practice, and close enough to Hogwarts.

He crept along the narrow tunnel and successfully made it back to Hogwarts. He pulled his shrunken invisibility cloak from his robe pocket, then put it on quickly after returning it to its normal size. Checking around to make sure no one was nearby, Harry began his journey back to the Gryffindor tower.

The thought of facing Ron and Hermione made his heart sink. What would they think of him if they found out what he had done? In order to help one of his friends, he had betrayed all his other friends. Harry knew he could never face his friends again without feeling guilty, but he would not doubt his choice again. What he had done was unfair for his other friends, but Tom was… special. Unlike his other friends, Tom had no other friends except Harry, so it was up to Harry to help him. More importantly, Harry cared for Tom unlike the way he cared for Ron and Hermione. It might have been due to the bond they shared, or the fact that Tom had been much younger than him when

he first met him, Harry had always felt it was his responsibility to protect Tom, the same way he would have cared for a little brother.

The thought of young Tom Riddle led to the thought of Voldemort, causing Harry to let out a weary sigh. He still had a very long way to go. If every meeting was anything like this one, Harry didn't know how long his sanity could last, or how long it would take for guilt to break him.

Harry sneaked behind a patrolling Umbridge and turned into the corridor leading to the Fat Lady portrait. He let out a sigh of relief. Umbridge didn't seem to have noticed Harry had not been in the dormitory for almost two hours.

He stopped before Fat Lady portrait. Making sure Umbridge was well out of sight, he pulled down his invisibility cloak. He muttered the password, then climbed through the entrance swiftly, ignoring the Fat Lady's protest for waking her up behind him.

The common room was deserted. It was no wonder since it was already past two o'clock in the morning. Two figures stood up and turned as one when Harry came in.

Harry felt a lump form in his throat. "Ron, Hermione."

"Where have you been, Harry?" said Hermione, reaching his side.

"We were about to find Dumbledore," said Ron. "You never came back this late before."

Harry lowered his head, understanding his friends' worries. "I'm sorry."

Ron and Hermione exchanged glances.

"Harry… what happened?" said Hermione tentatively. "Are you alright?"

Harry remained silent. He couldn't bring himself to tell them he was fine, which he certainly was not.

Ron was about to say something, but stopped himself. He gritted his teeth and looked away.

Harry frowned. "Ron?"

Ron glanced at him, than at Hermione, who spoke up, "We want to know what has happened to you, Harry. I know we've promised to leave you alone, but-"

"But we are worried!" Ron interrupted angrily, finally losing his self-restraint. "You come back late each night, and we both have no idea where you've gone. We're your friends, Harry! I can't stand all the secrets you've been keeping from us anymore. You asked us to let you deal with it yourself, but how can we just stay here, not knowing what dangerous situation you've put yourself into this time? We always worked as a team in the past, remember?"

Harry looked from Ron to Hermione, suddenly realizing how hard it must have been for his friends. A sense of guilt rushed over him again at the thought. Though it was impossible for Ron and Hermione to get involved, Harry knew they both deserved some answers.

"I will tell you," he said finally. "I'll tell you what happened in the summer... the part I can tell, at least. But not now, I'm exhausted," he said. "Tomorrow after the last class, I'll meet you here."

Harry was certainly not in the condition to start that conversation. He already had enough for a single day. All he wanted now was to escape from the world of consciousness, if only for a little while.

Ron and Hermione eyed each other, than both nodded.

"We just want to help, mate," Ron said quietly after him when Harry was half-way up the stairs.

Harry turned around. "I know, Ron," he said. "And you don't know how glad I am. I… I'm sorry."

With that, Harry ascended to the dormitory. He walked straight to his bed, not bothering to change, then drank his potion for a dreamless sleep.

Harry felt much better the next morning, though his left arm was still in pain and he was still suffering from guilt. He was walking down to the great hall for breakfast when he was cornered by Draco Malfoy.

Malfoy practically grabbed him by collar and dragged him into an empty classroom nearby. Harry was pushed against the wall, with Malfoy's wand pointing at his throat.

Seeing Malfoy's enraged face, Harry was starting to regret telling Ron and Hermione not to wait for him when they left for breakfast that morning. Malfoy would be cautious enough not to approach him with two Gryffindors around. Though, Harry doubted he could delay this meeting any longer, so he had not resisted. At least Malfoy had come to him, not Dumbledore. As much as Malfoy had claimed he did not trust the old man, Harry knew he would not hesitate to report had any other students appeared in the Death Eater meeting.

"How could you?" hissed Malfoy. "You joined him!"

"Look, Malfoy, I can expla-"

"Explain what? That this is what you've been planning all along? You created that absurd story about time travel in order to find out where you can find the Dark Lord from me, so that you can join him!" Malfoy tightened his grip on his wand.

"It's not like that-"

"Not like what? You've been planning you join him, haven't you?" Malfoy pressed.

Harry winced. "Yes, but-"

"I have trusted you! And you betrayed me!" Malfoy bellowed.

Harry shut his eyes briefly at the word 'betrayed'.

"I did not betray you, Malfoy," he said softly. "I have betrayed many others last night, but not you. If I have, you would be dead by now."

Malfoy's face darkened. Harry's statement seemed to have angered him even more.

"All the memories you saw are real," said Harry hastily, seeing Malfoy was closed to start throwing curses at him. "Voldmort-"

A sharp pain shot through Harry's left arm, causing Harry to hiss in pain, which was echoed by Malfoy.

"Don't speak his name, Potter!" hissed Malfoy, glaring at him, more in annoyance than anger this time.

"Sorry," Harry grunted automatically.

Malfoy had told him that Volde… the Dark Lord had placed a curse on all his Death Eaters that caused pain whenever someone said 'Voldemort'. Tom had renounced his birth name and adopted another name 'Alex' had created with him. Soon most people started to fear the name 'Voldemort' and had called him 'You-Know-Who' instead. Now Tom didn't even allow his own Death Eater to call him anything other than 'The Dark Lord'.

Harry had often forgotten that though, and had caused Malfoy much pain in the past. The previous scene of Malfoy hissing in pain and Harry apologizing had occurred so many times that it had somehow become a little joke between them.

Malfoy's anger seemed to have subsided a little. Harry knew Malfoy was remembering the time when Harry taught him Legilimency, the time when they got to know each other and to trust each other.

The blonde narrowed his eyes. "Explain," he commanded.

Harry took a deep breath. "My scar connected me to Vold- the Dark Lord. He can feel all my emotions. If Tom is there somewhere, then-"

It was enough for Malfoy to understand; he blinked in realization. "You're crazy! There's no different than suicide!"

"You are spying on the Dark Lord, Malfoy, and you are telling me I am suicidal," said Harry with a hint of amusement.

Malfoy snorted. "Why should I believe you, though?" he asked after a pause.

Harry sighed in relief. He knew Malfoy already believed him, but being a Slytherin and a Malfoy, he still needed proof.

"Other than the fact that I am the one who pursued you to become a spy and taught you Legilimency, I don't have any other proof," said Harry. "You can use Veritaserum on me if you want, but I think you've known me long enough to know I am telling the truth."

"You will allow me to use Veritaserum on you?" asked Mafoy, surprised.

Harry shrugged. "You already know the full truth anyway, there's not much to hide."

Malfoy stared at him for a long moment, then finally lowered his wand.

He laughed dryly. "It seems your Gryffindorish behavior is rubbing off on me."

Harry grinned for the first time since he had come back from the meeting. He was glad that he still had Draco Malfoy as an ally, and as a friend.

"I still think it's a crazy plan though," said Malfoy. "You should know by now how… hard it is, being a Death Eater."

Harry nodded. "I know, but-"

"This is the only way and you will not give up until the end, right, Harry?" said Malfoy, smirking. "Maybe the Dark Lord will surrender to your stubbornness eventually."

Harry rolled his eyes. Had Malfoy just supported him on his crazy plan?

Later that day, Harry, Ron and Hermione were found in the Gryffindor common room.

Harry dropped himself on the armchair nearby, letting out a long breath. How to begin?

Ron and Hermione eyed each other, then seated themselves near Harry.

Harry waved his wand to create a ward around them automatically. The ward would not only allow them to talk as loudly as they wanted without anyone else hearing them, but also prevent eavesdropping of any kind. That was a common spell among Harry's fellow Slytherins in the past. Privacy was valued among Slytherins, but not often respected, and Harry had gotten used to casting this spell whenever he needed to have a private conversation with Tom.

"What's that?" asked Ron.

"That is an advance ward, so no one can overhear our conversation," explained Hermione. "But where did you learn this, Harry? We won't learn it at least until next year."

"Someone taught me," said Harry, waving his hand dismissively. Then he turned serious. "I'm going to tell you what happened this summer... at least some part of it. But you must promise me not to tell anyone about this, not even Dumbledore."

Ron agreed immediately. Hermione hesitated, then nodded.

Harry took a deep breath. "Tell me, what do you know about time travel?"

Chapter 14: Summons

"Time travel?" Ron repeated. "What does that have to do with-"

"Everything," Harry interrupted. He took a deep breath. "During the summer holidays, I found… a magical item accidentally. I didn't know what it was for at first. When I touched it, it pulled me in like a portkey, only it didn't only carry me to another place, but to another time period as well. I was transported years into the past and I ended up spending a whole year in that time period." He paused and waited to questions to come.

Ron looked dumbfounded. "What?"

"But that's impossible, Harry," Hermione spoke up with her usual matter-of-fact tone. "No one can travel through time for more than twenty four hours. It's technically impossible. A human body can not withstand being transported across such a long time period."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Surviving the killing curse was supposed to be impossible too, Hermione," he said. "Why not time traveling?"

Besides, Harry added to himself, the man who made said magical item actually managed to create something that allowed him to live forever.

Ron frowned. "But… you've been with us the whole time!"

"That's how time traveling works, Ron," said Harry. "When I came back after staying in the past for a year, I was transported back to the exact time that I left. For you, it was as if I have not been gone at all. But for me, one year has passed."

Ron looked confused. "It doesn't make any sense, mate."

"Even if you did find a way to travel to the past, what about the rule of time traveling?" Hermione added. "What if you have let slip of something about the future? You could have altered the whole timeline."

Harry shook his head. "The magical sto- item that transported me to the past temporarily erased all my memory concerning the future, so I could not do any damage to the timeline.

Hermione furrowed her brows, apparently thinking about Harry's words.

"Is it really the truth, Harry?" she asked tentatively. "Is that why… you've…"

"Changed so much?" Harry finished for her, glad that Hermione seemed to have believed him. "I've spent a year in the past, living as a different person. It's impossible not to change." He eyed his two friends. "I've seen many things during that year, things that I could never learn as Harry Potter or the Boy-Who-Lived." He sighed. "I'm sorry for hiding all this from you, but there's something I have to finish with my… other identity; the identity I used when I was in the past. It's… a personal matter between someone I met in the past and me; no one can help me with it. I know you're worried, but I can't tell you what it's about until it's over… sorry."

Harry knew he had left out quite a lot, but as much as he hated hiding so much from his friends, he had no doubt, promises or not, that they would inform Dumbledore at once if they knew what exactly had happened and who he had befriended.

"So all those times you've left at night, it's because of this?" said Hermione.

Harry nodded. "Please don't ask me what it's about. I… can't tell you yet," he said, the feeling of guilt washed over him again.

Ron obviously was not satisfied with the answer. "What about Malfoy?" he asked. "Does he have something to do with this?"

Harry let out a small sigh. "I found out more about the Slytherins when I stayed in the past and even got to know some of them personally. They're not that bad, Ron," Ignoring Ron's shock expressions, Harry continued, "and I found that Malfoy didn't really want to follow his father's footsteps."

"What? You mean he didn't want to run off to his master?" said Ron, looking at Harry as if he had grown another head.

"Yes, he didn't want to be a Death Eater," said Harry rather coolly, clenching his left fist unconsciously. "So I showed him that he had choices other than doing what his father wanted and I suggested for him to help Dumbledore instead."

Ron blinked. "And he agreed?" At Harry's nod, he slumped down in his seat. "Malfoy? Helping Dumbledore? It's just impossible."

Harry merely smiled in respond.

"And yet you don't trust Professor Dumbledore," Hermione pointed out. "You haven't told him what happened, have you?"

"No," Harry stared at Ron, then at Hermione. "Please keep this a secret, at least for now, until… it's all over."

Hermione looked doubtful. "What is it that you have to keep from everyone, Harry?" she asked quietly. "What have you been doing? You're not doing something dangerous, are you?"

"Don't worry," Harry gave her a forced smile. "I'm safer than ever."

In a sense, that was not a lie, Harry thought bitterly. For probably the first time in his life under the name Harry Potter, Voldemort was not trying to kill him.

Hermione frowned. "If you say so, Harry," she said reluctantly. "I will not tell Professor Dumbledore, but I still think he should be informed about it."

Harry turned to his other friend. "Ron?"

Ron met Harry's gaze, then nodded finally. "I wish you would tell us what's troubling you, mate."

Harry was spared an answer when the entrance of the common room swung open at that moment, causing all three of them to turn sharply at the new-comer.

Harry quickly pulled out his wand and removed the ward he had set up earlier. He stood up together with Ron and Hermione, startled by the sudden appearance of their head of house.

A look at Professor McGonagall's grim face told Harry something had happened, and he had a dread feeling about it.

McGonagall surveyed the three of them, then stopped her gaze at Ron.

"Mr. Weasley, the headmaster wants to see you," she said finally.

"Those bastards!" Ron swore loudly as he paced back and forth before the fireplace.

Harry winced, but luckily no one seemed to have noticed.

"Sit down, Ron!" said George, annoyed.

Ron, Ginny, George and Fred had just come back from Dumbledore's office with a bad news: Arthur Weasley had been captured during a mission for the Order of the Phoenix, presumably by Death Eaters.

Ron dropped himself on a nearby armchair, then stared into the fireplace blankly.

Hermione let out a small sob from beside Harry.

"It's going to be all right, Hermione," said Harry as comforting as he could manage.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione sobbed. "What if…" she tailed off, looking away, unable to continue.

"Mr. Weasley is going to be fine," Harry repeated softly.

And he desperately hoped it was true.

George and Fred were sitting on a couch, looking as grim as the time when Ginny was missing during Harry's second year. Ginny was sitting on the floor near the fireplace, absentmindedly patting Crookshanks, who was sleeping next to her. None of them had any appetite for dinner, so they had skipped it and stayed in the common room instead.

Letting out a small breath, Harry leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. He was sitting among his friends, yet he felt so out of place. The burning pain radiating from his left forearm constantly reminded him of what he was now, and why he could never again sit beside his friends without feeling guilty.

They sat in silence for a long time, then Ginny stood up and headed back to the dorm wordlessly. She was soon followed by her twin brothers.

Hermione gave Ron a hug, which made Ron blush, despite the situation.

"Get some rest, Ron," she said. "We will find out more about Mr. Weasley when we arrive at the Order's headquarter tomorrow."

Christmas in Grimmauld place would have been fun, had the situation been different. First was the death of Hestia Jones, then was the capture of Mr. Weasley.

Harry didn't know how to behave around the members of the Order. How could he act as if nothing had happened after he had killed one of their members? Facing his godfather was even harder. What would Sirius think of him if he knew what he had done?

Because of Mr. Weasley's capture, no one seemed to have noticed Harry's uneasiness. Mrs. Weasley was worried sick, not even Fred

and George could think up anything to cheer her up, or cheer themselves up, for that matter. There was barely any news concerning Mr. Weasley's whereabouts.

Things went even worse three days before Christmas. After a pale Mrs. Weasley had pushed all of them to bed, something Harry had been both dreading and expecting happened. He was struggling to sleep as usual when a sharp pain shot through his left arm. He bit his lip to stop himself from crying out loud. Carefully, he pushed himself up from his bed and turned around to check on Ron, who was fast asleep. With a soundless apology, Harry pulled out his wand from under his pillow and whispered a spell to make sure Ron would sleep through the night. He rubbed his burning Dark Mark to ease the pain, then pulled out his invisibility cloak, which was also hidden beneath his pillow. He threw the cloak around him and slipped out of the room quietly.

He reached the deserted drawing room without much difficulty. Locking the door behind him, he transfigured his pajama into a dark cloak with another flick of his wand. Then, taking a deep breath, he reached into his pocket.

"Vado," he muttered as his hand closed around the cold surface of the portkey.

He landed with a loud crash as usual, incidentally woke up the resident of the house which he had broken in unannounced.

The living room brightened up and the said resident came into view.

"Harry?" said Nicolas Flamel.

The old wizard's confused expression immediately turned into a concerned one at the sight of Harry clutching his left arm. His half-awake eyes turned alert in an instant.

"He calls," said Harry simply, struggling to stay calm.

Nicolas nodded, then led Harry to the nearest apparition spot near the house without saying anything.

Harry followed wordlessly. His heart was racing and he was trying hard to push away the memory of what had happened when he last met Voldemort.

He had known there was no way he could sneak out of the Order's headquarters had Voldemort summoned him during his stay there. That was why he had asked Nicolas to create a portkey for him that could bring him to where Voldemort was using the signal given off by the Dark Mark, something Harry knew Nicolas was fully capable of making. But Nicolas had pointedly refused. Instead, he had told Harry to first portkey to his home, then apparate to where the meeting took place from there. This way, Nicolas had said, he could keep an eye on Harry, seeing as how Harry had kept this a secret from everyone else.

Harry shook his head at the over-protectiveness of the old wizard, while feeling quite reassured by this caring gesture.

After a short walk, they had arrived at the edge of Nicolas' anti-apparition ward. Harry pulled his hood over his face, then reached into his pocket, this time taking out a white mask, the mark of a Death Eater.

He hesitated, then glanced at Nicolas, who was watching him with sad eyes. With shaking hands, he covered his face with the mask, then stepped out of the ward.

Nicolas squeezed Harry's shoulder gently. "Be careful, Harry."

Harry nodded stiffly. He closed eyes, then using the burning Dark Mark as a focus, apparated to where Voldemort was.

Harry looked around his surroundings. He seemed to be in the same graveyard as last time. Following the other Death Eaters, he soon found himself standing before the throne of Lord Voldemort.

Harry identified Draco Malfoy and his father in the assembling crowd. They kissed the hem of Voldemort's robe before taking their space near the throne. From the corner of his eyes, Harry sensed the piercing gaze of someone on his far left. He carefully avoided making eye contact, knowing exactly who was staring at him. Only one Death Eater had been absent in the last meeting, Severus Snape. Harry had been surprised yet relieved when Snape had been dismissed immediately after he had given his report last time. Had Snape remained, Harry would be in so much more trouble, since he knew that no matter what he told the man, Snape would not hesitate to inform Dumbledore.

Harry turned away from Snape and approached Voldemort. All the noises ceased when he walked through the crowd. That was quite understandable. After all, he was Harry Potter, the one who was supposed to be the enemy of the Dark Lord, the one who had kneeled before the same Dark Lord no more than a week ago. He probably had the attention every single Death Eater present in the graveyard by now.

He wondered what he should do. Should he bow and kiss Voldemort's robe like other Death Eaters? But hadn't Voldemort stopped him from doing so last time?

"Stay where you are," Voldemort commanded coldly from his throne, obviously noticing Harry's thoughts.

Harry tensed at the cold voice. Then he remembered he was supposed to reply.

He bowed slightly. "Yes, my Lord," he said quietly, before stepping back and stood next to one of the Death Eaters.

Voldemort watched his newest Death Eater as he took his place next to Avery. He didn't understand why he didn't want the boy to kiss his robe. As a sign of showing him respect, he had required all his servants to do so, but when Potter was concerned, that gesture

simply felt so…wrong, just as it was so wrong when the boy called him 'Lord'.

Deep inside him, he knew exactly why. Because as much as he refused to believe, he knew Harry Potter was Alex Salutor. And such a submissive behavior coming from him was... unacceptable.

He pushed away those dangerous thoughts and focused on the meeting. It was an important step and it would not do to let those meaningless feelings distract him.

He rose and began, "Welcome, my faithful servants. The time has come for us to take our revenge. It is time to show Dumbledore and those fools in the Ministry who is in control. We will shape this world into what it should be and eliminate those who stand in our path." He paused and waited for the cheers to die down, while resisting the exactly opposite emotions coming from Potter. "Prepare for a large-scale raid when I next summon you. Do not disappoint me, or else…" He tailed off deliberately.

His Death Eaters bowed respectfully. Voldemort's gaze once again fell on Potter unconsciously, before focusing back to his other servants.

"Now, report you findings," he commanded.

Harry was only half-listening to the other Death Eaters' reports. Voldemort's speech kept echoing in his mind.

We will shape this world into what it should be and eliminate those who stand in our path.

That was something he could never imagine Tom saying. Was the boy he once knew really twisted so much?

He barely noticed when the meeting was over. After bowing to Voldemort once again, he left with the other Death Eaters.

Half-way through the graveyard, Harry was stopped by a Death Eater standing in front of him. He initially thought it was Snape, but the blond hair told Harry exactly who this Death Eater was. Draco was standing beside his father, his eyes betrayed no emotions.

Harry looked up and stared at Lucius Malfoy coolly, the same way he regarded the Slytherins who had insulted Tom or himself in the past.

The elder Malfoy sneered. "Potter, Potter. Who would have thought?" he said. "The Dark Lord has given you a place, but that means nothing. Those who are foolish enough to betray my master always get what they deserve, young Potter, so watch yourself and don't let me catch you doing anything funny."

If he only knew who the spy was, thought Harry.

"I am loyal to our master, if that's what you're worrying about," he replied coldly. "Thank you for warning me though, Mr. Malfoy."

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. "You insolent-" He was cut off by a familiar hissing voice.

/Stay off him, you filthy old ferret/

Harry choked back a laugh at the comment. He turned around to where the voice came from and his smile widened at the sight of a familiar snake.

/Nagini./

A/N: Sorry for long wait. I know I haven't updated for a long time. I simply didn't know how to write this chapter and the Snape issue was further hindering my progress. Why Snape? That's because after reading HBP, I found what I've planned for Severus will make him too OOC. I'm not saying the matter of betrayal, we won't know exactly who Snape has betrayed after book seven is released, right? What I'm saying is that after reading HBP, I really can't see how the cannon Snape would understand Harry's reasoning in this story, let alone

supporting him. So I decided to change my original plot a little. The ending will still be the same (more or less), but several details in between will be different.

I've also made a little change in chapter two to fit my change. That is, I've deleted the last sentence of the chapter concerning Snape. You may go and take a look if you want, but that's just a minor detail.

Seems that I'm now forbidden to respond to reviews here. So, for those who have questions, I will reply it with that new review reply feature.

Anyway, please review!

Chapter 15: Warnings

Harry watched Lucius Malfoy's startled expressions when Nagini advanced on him in amusement. The huge snake hissed threateningly, forcing Malfoy to take a step back. He reached into his robe pocket, which Harry assumed was for his wand, then hesitated.

Nagini was, after all, the Dark Lord's pet snake.

Harry met Draco's eyes briefly. Though Harry could not see it, he was sure that the younger Malfoy's eyebrows had risen up high behind the white mask by the curious look he was giving him.

Lucius Malfoy backed down. He glanced at Nagini, then gave Harry a cold look.

"Come on, Draco," he said, before he turned on his heel and strode towards the exit of the graveyard.

Harry let out a sigh when the father and son left. At least Voldemort's right-hand man would leave him alone for the time being. Though, he knew, Lucius Malfoy would stop at nothing to prove that Harry was not loyal to Voldemort, especially after this little episode. From the look of things, the elder Malfoy obviously considered Harry as a threat to his position in the Dark Lord's rank.

Harry pushed away his thoughts and turned back to the huge snake that had just scared Malfoy off.

/Master Alex./ Nagini lowered its head slightly in a bowing gesture.

Harry smiled sadly at the name. He had not been called that for… was that only a few months? So much had happened since he had returned from the past.

He was surprised at how glad he actually was that Nagini had recognized him. After Tom's numerous rejections, Harry found any reminder of his life as Alex oddly comforting.

/Nagini…/ Harry kneeled down, so he was at Nagini's eyelevel.

The huge snake edged closer to Harry, obviously delighted to see her old master.

Seeing Nagini so closely again brought back Harry's memories of the past. The time when Harry first set eyes on her, caged and mistreated. The time Harry decided to leave her with Tom in the past. The time when Voldemort was resurrected, Nagini waiting beside the steaming pot in excitement.

Nagini did love Tom, it seemed. She had stayed close with him for the past fifty years, protecting him. Harry wondered how she felt when she watched as Tom transformed into Lord Voldemort. But then, the sense of right and wrong meant little for the snake. For her, her master's order was the most important.

/Haven't I told you not to call me master, Nagini/ said Harry, smiling fondly. /Besides, I'm no longer your master./

He immediately realized his mistake when Nagini looked offended and, if possible, slightly hurt, by that statement.

/Why? Is it because of master/ asked the snake. /I've tried to tell master you wouldn't want him to do all those things, but master would only listen to the man called Grindelwald. Have I failed you, Master Alex/

/No, Nagini/ said Harry hastily. /You have not failed me. You've done a good job. It's just-/

He stopped abruptly when he heard faint footsteps approaching him from behind. He turned around to find an unmasked Death Eater standing not far away from him. His anger burned at the sight of the man.

"Wormtail."

Peter had been desperate to find the Dark Lord's snake. His master would definitely punish him had he failed to locate his missing snake.

The huge snake was by his master's side almost constantly, so Peter had not expected to find the snake in the presence of another Death Eater.

Of course, the presence of this person in a Death Eater outfit was highly unexpected itself.

Peter didn't quite know what to make of Harry Potter joining the Dark Lord. Though James and Lily knew they were no match to the powerful Dark Lord, they both had fought against him until the very end.

Peter did not have that strength. He was never as strong as his friends. He had no choice, the Dark Lord would have tortured him to death had he defied him.

But time and again, when they went on raids or during some particularly cruel torture sessions, Peter would doubt his choice in serving the Dark Lord. Being a Death Eater could sometimes be worse than death. But it was all too late now.

One thing was for sure, he definitely did not want James' and Lily's son to go through that. He had a feeling that the boy did not know half of what it meant to be a Death Eater. But that, too, was already too late.

"Harry…" he started, winced at the anger in the pair of enraged green eyes that was so similar to Lily's.

"I should have let them kill you that night," the boy hissed dangerously.

Peter took a step back in fear. "No, Harry," he said desperately. "Please, you have to understand. I have no choice, I just-"

"All you care about is your life. What about my parents? And Sirius? You betra-"

Harry stopped, a pain look passed through his eyes. His tightened his grip on his wand briefly, before lowering it, letting his hand fall back to his side.

"And I'm no better than you. A traitor," he whispered, his voice so hollow that it caused Peter to frown.

Peter swallowed, then asked, hesitantly, "Why… did you join?"

Harry remained silent for a moment. Then he narrowed his eyes. "That is none of your concern," he said coldly.

Peter sighed. "James… James would not want you to do this," he whispered.

Harry flinched visibly.

"You have no right to speak about my parents, Wormtail," he said, though his voice didn't sound as angry as it should have been.

Ignoring Peter, Harry bent down and hissed at Nagini. Peter stared in shock when the snake hissed back.

Harry Potter was a parselmouth? Where did that came from? Both James and Lily had nothing to do with Salazar Slytherin, as far as he knew. And why did the boy seem to be so familiar with the Dark Lord's snake in the first place?

Harry stood up after several exchange. With a last glance at Peter, he turned and walked towards the edge of the anti-apparition ward without saying anything else.

Peter snapped out from his shock and called out before he could stop himself. "Harry!"

Harry stopped in his tracks, but didn't turn around.

"A raid is… cruel," said Peter, shivered at his own experience. "Be prepared for it."

The boy stood still for a while, then he nodded slightly and went on to leave the graveyard.

Peter let out a small sigh, then turned back to the huge snake circling on the ground. He had better hurry to bring the snake back before the Dark Lord returned from his... visit.

"So Voldemort finally decided to reveal himself to the public," said Albus after hearing Severus' report.

Severus nodded grimly. "He did not give out any details regarding the raid, but it is definitely going to be a large-scale one."

Albus furrowed his brows. He was deeply troubled by the news. Voldemort had been careful in hiding the fact that he had returned for the last few months, gathering followers in the dark and recovering his power after his resurrection. Albus had hoped to alert the Ministry to the fact before Voldemort made any aggressive move, but it seemed he was already too late. He had not expected Voldemort to reveal himself so early, since, from the information Severus and young Draco Malfoy had brought back, there had been no sign at all to indicate the Dark Lord's sudden change of plan. Had it all been planned? Or had something triggered Voldemort into making his move so quickly? What made him think that it was time to reveal himself?

"Did Voldemort mention anything else?" asked Albus.

"No," said Severus, "but there is another new Death Eater. I can't find out his identity yet, but he seems young."

Albus sighed wearily. Another young one.

"For some reason, the Dark Lord didn't seem to be so pleased with his presence," Severus continued. "He didn't even allow him to touch his robe."

"Is that it? Interesting," said Albus thoughtfully. "Find out more about this new Death Eater if you can, Severus, but be careful."

Severus nodded and dismissed himself.

Albus watched as his trusted friend left, feeling concerned. Voldemort had already shown signs of suspicion in Severus' loyalty. As much as Severus had insisted that he could gain Voldemort's trust again, Albus couldn't help worrying for his friend's safety.

Though many had doubted Severus, Albus' trust in him had never wavered. Albus had been close to Severus even when the potions master was still a student. Some might say it was not appropriate for a teacher to build up such a close friendship with a student, who was not even in his house, but Albus knew Severus would be forever lost to the dark had he not gone out of line to show him he was loved.

Ironically, it was Tom Riddle who had taught Albus to care for his students. Albus had never really trusted Tom, right from the beginning, and that was one of his greatest regrets. Things might have turned out differently otherwise. Now Tom had fallen too deep into the dark that it was impossible to turn him back. Albus doubted there was still any light left in Tom, seeing that he had never truly cared for someone else- expect one.

Not for the first time Albus wondered what had happened to young Alex Salutor, a mysterious boy who had lost his memory. He had only stayed in Hogwarts for a year, before he was transferred to another school. He and Tom had been inseparable at that time, and he was probably the only one Tom had ever cared for.

Albus had not heard of him ever since he had left Hogwarts, but knowing Voldemort, it was very likely that he had found and recruited his old friend during his first raise. And Albus doubted Tom would care for Alex enough to keep him alive had he refused to join his cause.

A soft singing pulled Albus out of his thoughts. He smiled as Fawkes flew across the room and perched himself on his shoulder. He felt

himself began to relax from the earlier tension as he listened to the beautiful song of the phoenix.

Fawkes was deeply connected with Harry and Voldemort, since both their wands carried one of the phoenix's feathers. Albus always had the feeling that Fawkes was going to play a huge part in the upcoming war, and he also got the impression that the phoenix knew more about this war than anyone else.

"How will this war turn out?" he asked softly to himself.

Silence. There was no sound at all, except for his own shallow breathing.

He was trembling. Was it out of cold, or fear? He liked to think it was the former. He was, after all, a Gryffindor, and he would die like one.

Yes, he was going to die. He knew it.

Images of his wife and children flashed before his eyes again. He shook his head weakly, desperate to clear his mind. Hadn't he told himself not to think of them?

He didn't want to think of how his family would react to his death. Ginny was too young for this. And Percy… would he come back home then? How about the other children? And Molly…

It would be hardest on her. And she was left to hold the family together…

Arthur struggled to focus on his surroundings, the dark cell, the half-filled water bucket… anything, anything but his family and his wife.

His heart jumped as he heard clear footsteps echoed in the dark dungeons, where he had been brought in several days ago.

Several days? Had it only been several days? It felt like years.

He pushed himself to a sitting position, leaning heavily on the cold stone wall. He braced himself for another round of torture; it had been like a routine for the past few days.

His visitor revealed himself before his cell and Arthur found himself sucking in a sharp horrified breath.

Nothing he had heard from Harry and the order could prepare him for facing the resurrected Dark Lord for real.

A monster.

He was shaking violently now. True, he had been a member of the order during You-Know-Who's first raise, but he had seldom been involved in actual battling and while he had seen the Dark Lord before, it had never been even close enough to fire a curse.

"Arthur Weasley," Voldemort said with a hissing voice that sent a cold shiver through Arthur.

Arthur tried to force his fear to stay at bay, with no avail.

"Ah, afraid, are you?" Voldemort continued in a quiet, yet terrifying tone. "Then perhaps you can answer a few questions for me. I might make your death a little easier…"

Arthur gritted his teeth. He might have to die, but he was not going to let this monster get any information from him and use it against his family and friends.

With that thought in mind, his courage slowly returned.

"You won't get anything from me," Arthur said, as calmly and confident as he could manage.

Voldemort gave him a dark smirk. "Is that so? Then maybe I should ask your wife instead? And your children?"

Something in Arthur snapped at the mention of his family, his fear momentarily forgotten. He lurched himself towards the bars of the cell.

"Leave them out of it!" he snarled.

Voldemort laughed sadistically, obviously enjoying Arthur's reaction.

"How noble, Arthur Weasley, so you fear for them more than yourself?" he said, with a hint of contempt in his voice. "Such a fear is your weakness."

Arthur clenched his fists, his anger rising.

"A weakness? They are my life and are anything but weakness!" He looked straight at the Dark Lord and continued quietly, "I may not be powerful, but at least I have someone to care for, and someone who loves me in return… unlike you. And you don't deserve having any love, you heartless monster."

A flicker of emotions flashed across Voldemort's red eyes, then he sneered and raised his wand.

The next second, Arthur fell onto the ground, screaming in pain.

After what felt like ages, the curse was lifted off and Arthur found himself panting shakily on the cold stone floor, with Voldemort staring down at him from outside the cell.

"Enough talk." said the Dark Lord, sounding as cold as ever. "I will search for it myself seeing as you seem to have trouble answering my questions." He pointed his wand at Arthur again, who was too weak to even move. "Now, tell me who the spy is. Legilimens."

A/N: I'm sooooo sorry for the delay, this chapter took me ages to complete. Blame Square Enix for releasing Kingdom Hearts 2 during Christmas…

Yes, I know Harry's meeting with Nagini is short, but don't worry, they'll meet each other again in the future.

Many of you asked me about the horcruxes. Again, for the sake of the plot, I will not take that part of canon into account (though it will certainly be fun…). Nagini is Nagini, not one of Voldemort's horcruxes.

Also, Enelen asked me why Tom didn't seem to be able to remember his friendship with 'Alex', and I think I would better answer that here to clear up some points. Tom is still Tom, in terms of memory, at least. Grindelwald's influence, Tom's own hatred, adding with the excessive use of Dark Magic, pushed Tom to a stage that hatred, revenge, etc. are the only things left in him, or so he and many others thought. He did not forget 'Alex', he's just suppressing the 'foreign' emotions provoked by his friend. He didn't want to admit, or even realize, that somehow he still consider 'Alex' as his friend. Besides, according to himself, love is nothing but weakness, so he won't allow himself to treat 'Alex' any differently. I hope this help, it's hard to explain Tom's feeling.

Anyway, the next chapter will be, obviously, about that little raid of Tom. Things are not going to be pleasant for Harry…

Again, thanks for Irihi Safaia and all the reviewers! And, of course, please review!

Chapter 16: Trapped

Harry stood alone in the drawing room, staring out from the window at the silent street of Grimmauld Place. He was feeling unnaturally excited that night and not at all sleepy.

He listened carefully for any sound outside the room. It was nearly one in the morning and Mrs. Weasley certainly wouldn't like seeing him out of bed at this hour, especially when he was going back to school the next day.

Mrs. Weasley had been busying herself in the Order Headquarters, desperate to make everyone enjoyed the Christmas holiday as much as possible. But even though she had been acting as if nothing was wrong, everyone could see just how hard Mr. Weasley's capture was for her. That was understandable, since they still couldn't find any clue of where Mr. Weasley was. The only thing they knew was that Mr. Weasley was still alive, since the hand that represented Mr. Weasley on the Weasley family clock was still there, pointing at "mortal peril" as usual. The hand, according to Ron, would have disappeared if Mr. Weasley had been killed. Harry had a feeling that this little hope was the only thing that kept Mrs. Weasley going at the moment.

Percy's return might also help. Percy had refused to acknowledge the fact that his father had been captured by Voldemort at first, insisting that it was simply a ploy on Dumbledore's part. Percy had even sent an owl stating that he did not want to receive anything from his family again and that he was disappointed to see his family still believing Dumbledore's lies.

Then, a few days after they received Percy's owl, the Weasley in question surprised everyone by flooing to the Order Headquarter one day unannounced, saying that the Ministry requested his father's presence in some meetings. Of course, it was clear that Percy's true intention was to see his father for himself to confirm his own claim. After all, Mr. Weasley had already been absent from work for a whole week. Percy had changed quickly from feigned indifferent to alarmed and worried once he saw the state his mother was in. Harry smiled slightly as he recalled the scene of the reunion. Fred and George had

pulled some rather nasty pranks on Percy, of course, but they had all forgiven Percy eventually and welcomed his return with open arms.

Harry wondered what would happen when they found out his secrets. Percy's faults were nothing compared to what he had done. They would not forgive him, that's for sure, nor did he deserve any forgiveness.

Harry let out a deep sigh and rubbed his temple. This Christmas was by far the worst he had experienced. Being around the order members and the Weasleys all the time made Harry doubt his decision more than ever. And after what had happened on Christmas Day…

Somehow, Harry was not surprised that Tom had chosen Christmas Day, the day of peace and joy, to make his first move.

Early that morning, the wizarding world had been hit with the news of a massive break out in Azkaban. Dozens of convinced Death Eaters had escaped and the dementors had revolted. From what Harry had been able to gather in the warded headquarters, the Ministry had tried to cover the fact, but it had leaked out somehow and the wizarding world had been in fear and confusion, which, Harry knew, was exactly what Voldemort had wanted.

After the coming raid, which Harry had been dreading ever since the last meeting, the whole wizarding world would be in a state of panic, making them vulnerable to the Dark Lord's conquest.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. Despite his grim thoughts, the strange feeling of excitement still lingered and that made him feel really unsettled. He cleared his mind in an attempt to calm himself, but found that the feeling did not cease. Instead, the excitement and anticipation seemed to be growing stronger…

Harry frowned. Could it be…?

Yes, it had to be Tom. He had known they could feel what the other felt, but he never knew it could be that was as if Harry was feeling

those emotions himself, but they were definitely coming from the other side of the bond. Had Voldemort felt his emotions this way too?

But the excitement… only one thing could made Voldemort this excited.

The raid.

Harry took in a shaky breath. If that was the case, he had better go back to his room and prepare-

"Harry?"

Harry jumped at the voice. He turned around sharply to find Percy Weasley standing by the door.

Percy frowned at the sight of Harry. He had always stayed up late to finish his work for the Ministry, and he been surprised to hear noise coming from the drawing room when he was heading back to his room.

"You should be in bed, Harry," he said, knowing the boy was going back to Hogwarts early the next morning.

"I can't sleep," said Harry. "I'm planning to go back to my room anyway."

Percy nodded. He had meant to apologize to Harry personally for some time, but couldn't find the opportunity. He stepped into the room before he could stop himself and stared uneasily into Harry's curious gaze.

Percy hated admitting his wrongs, yet he found himself doing just that quite often after he had come back home. But then, he was at fault this time. He had hurt his family deeply, he knew it, and his father… Percy couldn't believe how he had acted when he first received the news. Instead of comforting his family, as he should have, he had accused his family of tricking him.

And Harry… it only occurred to Percy recently of how much the boy had gone through, and how cold Percy had been to him since the tournament last year.

"Harry, I…" Percy started, feeling awkward. "I want to apologize, for my attitude last year. I should have supported you, but instead, I… well, we all know what I've done," he said the last part with a nervous laugh.

Harry looked surprised, and Percy didn't blame him. After all, Percy was not as close to Harry as his siblings were.

"It's all right," said Harry with a small smile, but Percy couldn't help but notice the guilt that was underlying in his voice.

Percy shook his head. He must have imagined that, Harry had no reason to feel guilty.

He smiled slightly, relieved that Harry seemed to have forgiven him. Then, deciding he had delayed Harry his sleep long enough, Percy wished the boy a good evening and turned to leave.

He was a step out of the drawing room when a hiss of pain stopped him. He turned around to see Harry's face contorted in pain.

Alarmed, Percy rushed to Harry's side. "Harry! Are you all right?"

A look of panic crossed the boy's face as he heard Percy's voice. Percy watched in concern as Harry took in several deep breaths in an attempt to steady himself.

"I'm fine," Harry replied in a natural tone, but Percy could hardly believe him.

"No, I'll… go and call someone. Are you all right by yourself?" asked Percy, growing more concern by minutes.

"No!" the boy shouted, the frightened look clear in his eyes this time. He continued in a calmer manner. "I'll… be fine, Percy. It's not the first time, I just need a good rest."

Percy frowned as Harry made his retreat unsteadily. He reached out and placed his hand on Harry's left shoulder, trying to help the boy.

Harry's reaction caught Percy by surprised. Harry hissed once he felt the weight of Percy's hand on his shoulder. He jerked away from Percy violently and, in reflex, grabbed his left arm tightly in obvious pain.

"What-"

Percy looked up to see Harry staring at him with wide eyes. Percy narrowed his eyes. The obvious pain Harry was in. The look of panic on Harry's face. The boy grabbing his left forearm, which seemed to be the source of his pain.

Somewhere in Percy's mind he made the connection. All these pointed to one conclusion, an outrageous conclusion.

Yet every sense in Percy told him he was right…

"No…" he muttered softly.

Slowly, he closed the door behind him and took a step towards Harry.

"You… you are a Death Eater," even as he said it, Percy couldn't quite believe his own words.

"Percy, I-" Harry gritted his teeth, looking away.

This action was enough to confirm Percy's dread.

He clenched his fists. "How could you?" he whispered, his voice shaking with emotions.

Suddenly became aware of his situation, Percy reached for his wand. But before he could touch his wand, a blinding red beam hit him hard in his chest and he knew no more.

Albus Dumbledore took in a deep breath. He believed himself to be a patient man, but even so, his patience had its limit. Severus had gone to the meeting half an hour ago. And if Voldemort had not changed his plan, a massive raid would take place tonight.

With the dementors siding with Voldemort, Albus knew the Order itself would not be enough to do anything against Voldemort's force. They needed the help of the Ministry.

And if even a boy's death after the Tournament last year and the break out in Azkaban were not enough for Cornelius Fudge to believe Voldemort's return, Albus knew he was in for an almost impossible task if he was to convince Fudge to send out his Aurors.

He looked back at the clearly annoyed face of the Minister of Magic in the fireplace.

"Isn't it clear, Cornelius? Only the convicted Death Eaters were released when the dementors revolted. Can't you see who now commands the dementors? Azkaban is now out of the Ministry's control. And thousands of lives will be lost tonight if you don't act now," Albus said firmly.

Cornelius winced at Albus' commanding tone, but the sneer had never left his face and he replied impatiently, "I am a busy man, Albus, and I have wasted enough time here listening to your preposterous claim."

Albus felt his patience left him. "Preposterous!" Again, the Minister winced at Albus's tone. "How many deaths do you need before you finally see the truth? It is the Ministry's respon-"

Albus was interrupted when a white mist in the form of a leopard appeared in his office. He turned from the enraged Minister to Severus' patronus. Raising his hand, Albus touched the transparent head of the animal. Severus's voice echoed in Albus' head upon the touch.

"Albus, there's at least seventy Death Eaters and an army of inferi gathering here. The Dark Lord won't tell us the location of the raid. We will be using portkeys instead of apparition. The only clue I can gather is that it's a remote muggle village in the north and it should be fairly large. I may not be able to send messages without it being suspicious once I'm there, so you will have to trace my location. Be quick, Albus, he's planning to annihilate the whole village."

Albus took in a sharp breath. Annihilate the whole village.

He glanced at Cornelius. If Voldemort was using the inferi again, he would need the Ministry's full support. There was no time. If Cornelius refused to be convinced, then Albus would have to let him see for himself.

"Come to my office, Cornelius. I will show you the proof," said Albus coolly.

The Minister narrowed his eyes. "If you are going to waste more of my time-"

"Just come through the fireplace, Fudge," Albus snapped, no longer bothering to suppress his anger. "If you still don't believe me, then I will never bother you and the Ministry again."

The Minister appeared thoughtful at the proposal. He seemed rather shaken at being shouted at by Albus Dumbledore.

"All right," he said eventually, stepping through the fireplace to Albus' office. "You will stop spreading this nonsensical idea of You-Know-Who returning after this."

Albus walked across his office to his wooden cabinet, where he stored his pensieve. He took out the stone basin and placed it on his

desk. With a sigh, he tapped it with his wand to select a particular memory he knew could convince Cornelius. Severus' memory. One that contained Severus' latest meeting with the Dark Lord. He had asked Severus to store it in his pensieve for a time like this.

Albus was really reluctant in taking this step. He knew Severus hated to show others his memories. But now was a desperate time and he needed Cornelius to believe him.

"I trust that you know only real memories can be stored in a pensieve, Cornelius?" said Albus, gesturing to the stone container. "Take a look at this memory then, and reconsider you decision before it is too late."

Percy blinked dizzily as he finally regained conscious of his surrounding. What had happened? The last thing he remembered was-

He gasped and pushed himself up from wherever he was lying, fully awake. His eyes darted around at the unfamiliar place. It seemed to be a standard bedroom, with a large bookshelf in the corner and several cauldrons on the floor.

Where was he? Did Harry take him to You-Know-Who? Yet somehow he doubted the Dark Lord would let his prisoner stay in such a comfortable bedroom.

He gritted his teeth at the thought of Harry Potter. The boy he was beginning to trust and respect, after knowing how many times he had saved them all, was actually working for the Dark Lord. How long had Harry been working for You-Know-Who? Something was not right. What had turned Harry when he had stopped the Dark Lord so many times before? Or had Percy been tricked and that, too, was all lies?

He shook his head. Now was not the time for this. He needed to find a way out. He reached for his wand, and was surprised that it had not been taken away from him.

If he was not captured, then where was he?

"Ah, I see you're finally awake. Harry seems to have put a little too much power in that spell of his," came an unfamiliar voice.

Percy turned in the direction of the voice to find himself staring at an old man almost as old, if not older, than Dumbledore.

"Who are you?" Percy inquired, tightening his grip on his wand. Now was not the time for manners. "And where am I?"

"Easy, child," said the old man. "I am not working for Tom, if that's what you are thinking."

Percy narrowed his eyes. "Tom?"

The old man blinked, then said, "Voldemort."

Percy flinched at the name, but managed to keep his face straight. "Who are you?"

"My name is Nicolas Flamel," said the old mans slowly. "And you are currently at my house."

"Nicolas Flamel?" Percy echoed. That name seemed familiar. Percy remembered it from Ron's account of his adventure in first year. "You are… the alchemist that owned the Sorcerer's Stone."

Flamel nodded. He seemed pleased that Percy recognized him.

"Why am I here?" asked Percy. "The last thing I remember..." he tailed off, finding it hard to believe even now.

"Is Harry Potter attacking you," Flamel finished for him. The old man sighed. "I know you have many questions, but it would be best if we wait until Harry's back before starting the explanation."

After all that he had found out that night, Percy didn't know if he should be surprised to know that the great alchemist Flamel somehow seemed to know Harry Potter personally.

"You know Harry?" he asked.

"Who doesn't?" answered Flamel quickly with a smile. "Yes, I've known Harry personally for some time."

"Do you know he is a…"

"Death Eater?" asked Flamel.

Percy nodded, warily.

Flamel sighed. "Yes, I know," he said quietly, sounding a little guilty. "I don't agree with his… method, but it is partly my fault that he has chosen this path."

Percy was confused. What was Flamel talking about? Why was the old alchemist involved in the first place?

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Flamel shook his head. "Not now, child," he said. "I know you want answers, but let's wait until Harry's back."

"Where's Harry?" asked Percy. Then he remembered what had caused him to discover Harry's secret. "He's… meeting with You-Know-Who?"

Flamel shook his head. He seemed much older at that moment.

"Harry's on a raid," he answered softly, worry lining his voice.

Voldemort stared at the burning village in satisfaction. The raid was going smoothly so far. He had been careful in not revealing the actual location of the raid while making sure he had left enough clues for the traitor Severus Snape to report to Dumbledore. He didn't mind letting the old fool know where the raid was. After all, the whole point of this raid was to intensify the fear he had successfully inflicted on the world earlier. So he had to make sure Dumbledore and his little army could

find them. And if he knew Dumbledore, the old fool would probably try to convince the Ministry into helping him as well. He smirked. All the better.

He had commanded his Death Eaters to disapparate immediately once they saw the Dark Mark over the village. If everything worked according to his plan, his Death Eaters should be able to turn the village before him into ruin before the Ministry and the old fool worked out their location.

Now was not the time to confront Dumbledore's force directly. That would have to wait until the full-scale attack he was planning. And things would be much easier once the fear began to set in and the wizarding community started to doubt their so-called leaders' capabilities.

He glanced coldly at the figure beside him. Normally only Wormtail would stay behind during a raid, the worthless rat was too afraid to take part in any action. But for some reason, he had been… relieved that Potter had chosen to stay behind as well, rather than going into the village. Somehow, he didn't want Potter to see and to experience whatever was going on in the burning city.

Harry filched from the sight of the burning village. The Death Eaters had just arrived not more than ten minutes ago and the place was already filled with screams, pleas, and death. No one could imagine the living hell before him had only a short moment ago been a peaceful village. He closed his eyes and turned away from the unbearable sight.

He fought hard not to think of what had happened earlier in the headquarters and focused on the raid before him. He would deal with the other problems after this was over.

He glanced up at Voldemort, who was standing beside him. The Dark Lord had simply ignored his presence so far, and had not even inquired why Harry had not gone into the village along with the other Death Eaters. The only other Death Eater that had stayed on the

border of the village was Wormtail, who was stationed on the other side of the Dark Lord. Pettigrew seemed content to stay with his master and Voldmort didn't seem to expect the man to be anywhere else.

A loud explosion could be heard from the far end of the village. Harry winced and gritted his teeth.

If that was what it was like to watch the destruction of the village from afar, Harry didn't want to know what the sight inside the burning village was.

Another scream reached Harry's ears. The Gryffindor in him wanted nothing more than to be rushing into the site and helping as many as he could. But he knew he was powerless to help any of the dying villagers. And the mask that was covering his face kept reminding him of his place and of the reality that he was one of the monsters responsible for this merciless assault.

Why would anyone want this?

A movement caught Harry's attention. From a narrow alley, one of the few exits of the village, a woman ran out with a boy not older than eight. The woman was still in pajamas and there was a deep wound on her forehead. She kept glancing at the boy behind her as they ran out of the alley, right towards where the Dark Lord was standing.

The two escaping muggles stopped in their track several feet away from them. The boy cried out and backed away fearfully, staring at Voldemort's face in horror.

The Dark Lord's wand was out before Harry could react. With a sadistic smile that made Harry flinch, Voldemort first pointed the wand at the small boy. "Crucio!"

"No! Not my son!" The woman cried, rushing to the side of the screaming child on the ground and holding him in her arms helplessly as the child continued to twist violently. She stared up at Voldemort, tears running down her cheek. "Please… take me instead. Not my son. I beg you…"

Voldemort let out a horrible laugh. Harry felt a lump at his throat as watched the familiar sight of a mother protecting her child.

Soon the screams of the boy died down. The child lay lifeless on his mother's lap. The hollow look of his haunted blue eyes was his only response to his mother's desperate shout of his name.

Harry averted his eyes, not bearing to look at the sight.

After a while, the woman's cracking voice could be heard again, "You… monster… I'll…"

Voldemort smirked, seemingly enjoying the situation. "What will you do? What can you do?" He shook his head. "How pathetic. Crucio!"

The curse once again shot from Voldemort's wand. The screams of the woman rang through the place.

Harry felt his knees weakening. The image of the boy's haunted look and the screams of the woman were fast becoming too much for him.

"Stop that," he said in a hoarse voice, looked up at the Dark Lord.

Voldemort narrowed his eyes, as if he was having some difficulties in maintaining his concentration.

"What did you say, Potter?" said the Dark Lord, not taking his eyes from the woman.

"Stop that," said Harry, more forcefully this time. He could hear Nagini hissing warningly at him from Voldemort's side.

"Are you commanding me?" hissed Voldemort dangerously.

Harry gritted his teeth. "Why… why are you doing this? She's… she's just-"

"A worthless being. One of the many pathetic muggles," Voldemort spat. He tightened his grip on his wand. "Control your emotions, Potter."

Harry clenched his fists. "Just because they have hurt you before doesn't mean you have the right to kill them all, Tom!" he shouted, before realizing that he had crossed the line.

"Avada Kedavra!" Voldemort ended the woman's life before turning his full attention to Potter.

How dare the boy talk to him like that? How dare he remind him of his childhood?

He had allowed the boy the stay behind, but Potter was taking things too far. He was a Death Eater after all, regardless of what his reason for joining him might be. And as such, Potter deserved to be punished for his disrespect. He had not been acting like a Death Eater ever since he had been marked, and it was time to teach the boy a lesson.

He raised his wand, then stopped when he remembered the constant protection that he himself had given to the boy. He sneered. It was time to end Potter's childish hope once and for all. Though he refused to admit it, the strange emotions that he had been experiencing since Potter had first contacted him through the bond several months ago was affecting him, weakening him. Now was time to stop it all.

"Accio."

The spell caught Potter by surprised. The deep green crystal flew out from under Potter's robe, stopping only when the silver necklace had stretched its full length. The enchanted necklace could only be broken by one person other than Potter himself.

Voldemort reached out and grabbed the glowing crystal in the air. His eyes widened when he felt the power of the crystal trying to repel him, burning like fire in his fist. But Voldemort did not withdraw his hand. The pure protective power disgusted him.

Potter gasped. "You can't-"

Voldemort tightened his grip on the crystal, ignoring the pain the crystal was inflicting on him, and broke the necklace with a sharp pull. The boy gave out a cry of pain and fell down on the ground, a deep red mark appeared on his neck at the impact of the pull.

"And why can't I?" hissed Voldemort. "You will learn your place, Potter. Crucio!"

Potter struggled for a while before screaming out loud. Wormtail tensed at the sound, but Voldemort ignored him as usual. He focused on Potter, anger filling him. He didn't know what had made him so angry. Because Potter had mentioned his childhood? Because the crystal had reminded him of just how much he had once cared for the boy laying before him? Or was it because of the fact that the protection crystal he had given to Potter himself so long ago was now repelling him?

He didn't understand and that confusion angered him ever more. He would make Potter pay for creating all this.

/Master, please stop the curse. He cannot endure it much longer./

Nagini's plea broke his concentration. He stared down at the boy, trembling on the ground. The ground around him was strained deep red by his own blood. It startled Voldemort to know that Nagini was right. Potter would have died had he continued his curse any longer. And the fact that he could have killed the boy without the distraction disturbed him more than anything.

"Wormtail," Voldemort glanced at the shaken Death Eater and nodded towards Potter's direction.

Wormtail nodded and stumbled to Potter's side, checking his condition. Voldemort let out his breath when Potter managed to get back on his feet after some support from Wormtail.

Why was he feeling so relieved? Did it really matter if Potter had died?

Voldemort didn't know the answer and that frightened him. The answer of that question had always been so clear for the last fifteen years, but now he just wasn't sure.

Potter steadied himself. He looked up and the Dark Lord found himself staring into a pair of eyes filled with pain, disbelief and… fear.

Fear.

Potter was probably the only person that didn't stare at him with either animosity or fear. And now… the emotions in Potter's eyes were just too much. For once, Voldemort averted his eyes.

Potter stayed motionless for a while, before turning sharply and running unsteadily away from Voldemort, into the burning village of death before them.

"Crucio!"

Draco tensed as the muggle's scream rang through the house. He stood still next to his father as he watched the helpless man suffered under his father's cruse. He carefully masked his emotions, as he always did, but the sound of crying and screaming coming from the all over the muggle village made the task much harder than usual.

He knew that was not what a Malfoy was supposed to be, but Draco was terrified. The sight of a massive raid itself was unbearable, and knowing he himself was one of the bringers of this disaster made it much worst. He wanted nothing more than to leave this living hell.

"I cannot stop you, Draco, but while you still have a chance to turn away, I want you to make your decision carefully," Severus had told him solemnly when he came to the Christmas Party at the Malfoy Manor.

Severus seemed really reluctant in letting Draco follow his father to the raid, and Draco had never seen his godfather dreading something so much.

And once Draco had followed his father into this village, he soon understood why Severus had been so afraid.

Cold laughter drew Draco's attention from the twisting muggle to his father. He flinched at the sight of his father's obvious enjoyment. His father's grey eyes widened sadistically as he continued to torture the muggle.

Draco took a step back involuntarily. Was this his father? Was this… monster the same man who Draco had looked up to the most for as long as he could remember? What was before him was nothing but a sadist who took pleasure in inflicting pain on innocents.

He felt his world shatter. For perhaps the first time in his life, Draco finally realized what it meant to follow his father's footstep and just what he had now gotten himself into.

A sudden impact from behind nearly knocked Draco to the floor. He turned around sharply and sent his attacker down on the ground with a quick flick of his wand. Acting on instinct, he rushed forward and pinned his attacker on the floor, pointing his wand at the muggle's throat.

"Murderer!"

Draco found himself wincing at the word. The muggle was a boy about his age. Tears were rolling down the boy's face as he continued to kick aimlessly at Draco from form the ground.

"Kill him, son," said his father, glancing at Draco's direction briefly.

Glancing from his father to the boy, Draco gritted his teeth and pointed his wand at the boy.

"Avada Kedavra." Draco closed his eyes and turned away from the lifeless body on the floor.

Harry ran aimlessly into the village. He knew it was foolish of him to venture into the site of the raid in his weakened state, but he now wanted nothing more than to stay as far away from the Dark Lord as possible.

He was scared. Scared of what the Dark Lord had done to him. Scared of what he would witness if he continued to stay at the Dark Lord's side. And scared of knowing that all he had done was for nothing; that Voldemort was really beyond redemption.

He had run to the middle of a street when stopped in his track. There were flames everywhere, but otherwise, the whole street was in dead silence, as if it was devoid of all lives. Which was most probably the truth, Voldemort's order of annihilating the village was still clear in Harry's mind.

The sound of heavy footsteps from behind him caused Harry to turn around sharply. Walking towards him from behind a burned house was a middle-aged man, holding a handgun in his hand. The man's eyes widened when he saw Harry.

Harry was stunned at the utter hatred he could see in the man's eyes. He couldn't imagine what kind of terror this man must have gone through to drive him to this state of near madness.

He backed away when the man lunged forward, clutching Harry's neck unexpectedly and pinning him to the nearby wall. Harry widened his eyes and struggled in the strong grip, choking for breath. He reached for his wand but was stopped when the madman kicked him in his stomach heavily.

"Murderer…deserve to…"

Harry couldn't make out any more of what the man was muttering to himself. He recovered from the kick and was able to push the man off

him. He stumbled to the ground, panting heavily. He looked back at the man and froze when he found the man's gun pointing directly at him, aiming at his heart. His hand had just reached his wand when a loud bang rang though the quiet street.

Harry's vision blackened. The only thing he knew before he lost consciousness was the Dark Mark hanging over the town, and the sound of apparition that indicated the Aurors' arrival.

Chapter 17: Internal Conflicts

"The Aurors have arrived, master."

Voldemort ignored the nervous voice of Wormtail as he gazed at the ruin that had once been a lively village. Everything was running smoothly according to his plan. The Aurors had just arrived to find nothing but hundreds of muggle corpses together with a Dark Mark hanging over the village, just as he had wanted. All of his Death Eaters should have disapparated by now; and those who were foolish enough to ignore his command and remain in the village deserved nothing but punishment, be it by the Ministry or Voldemort himself.

"Master, we should-"

Voldemort turned his gaze sharply towards Wormtail, who wisely closed his mouth. Yes, they should leave now, before the Aurors arrived. Though Voldemort had no doubt the Aurors were no match for him, now was not the time to confront them directly. Yet-

A part of him urged him forward, into the village. The urge had been growing stronger ever since a surge of alarm and panic had assaulted him from Potter's side of the mental link a few minutes ago. The emotions had died down as quickly as they had come, until nothing was left but emptiness.

And that had alarmed the Dark Lord more than he would like to acknowledge.

Potter was still alive, he knew, he was merely unconscious. But it also meant that it was only a matter of time before the boy was captured.

And that was what Potter deserved for his own foolishness, wasn't it? Besides, the old fool's force would be crushed once they saw the Dark Mark on the boy's arm. That would surely give him a huge advantage over the war. There was no reason for him to do anything to save the boy from his fate, none at all.

"Wormtail, take Nagini and disapparate."

Wormtail looked relieve at the command. "Y-Yes, master."

And for once, almost against his will, Voldemort chose to disregard his rational reasoning. He waited until Wormtail had disapparated, before striding into the village.

It was not difficult to track Potter's location. After Potter had contacted him mentally several months ago, the boy had never really closed the link. He had put up a loose barrier to prevent Voldemort from invading his mind, yet he had left the link open enough for Voldemort to find out his location.

It was not as easy as Voldemort would have wanted though, not when even he himself didn't know why he was doing this. He felt the anger burn in him again as he continued to walk along the deserted street.

Why was he saving Potter? Letting the boy live when he could have easily killed him was one thing, but actively trying to rescue him?

No, he had every reason to just let Potter be captured, yet he found that he kept walking forwards.

That was absurd.

Yet it felt so right.

He clenched his fists at the conflicting feelings. Why? Why did it matter if anything would happen to the boy?

'You fear for them more than yourself? Such a fear is your weakness.'

He remembered himself saying those words to Arthur Weasley merely a week ago. If anything, this had just further confirmed his belief. He hated feeling so unsure. And he hated being vulnerable more than anything. He was, and always would be, the one who was in control. Control over the situation, over his followers and his enemies. He knew exactly what to expect and how to counter whatever was thrown towards him.

He hated not being the one in control. And only one person had ever made him feel that way. Not Dumbledore, but a mere boy. The only one- both now... and then.

And wasn't that another reason why he should just let Potter die? Yet he still had not stopped, going against every sense of himself to save the boy, when it was the boy's own stupidity that had landed him into this situation.

'You wouldn't need to be saved in the first place if it wasn't for me,' a young voice from distant memories echoed in his mind.

His own voice.

No. That was not him. He had left behind that name and everything that was tied to it a long time ago.

And if that was no longer him, then why did he care?

He was saved from going down that dangerous trend of thoughts when he caught sight of a moving figure some distance before him. He narrowed his eyes. A surviving muggle? Something caught Voldemort's attention. In one hand of that muggle was a white mask, the mask of a Death Eater. The man was muttering under his breath, leaning over something on the ground… Potter.

Voldemort felt a sudden wave of fury rushing over him. He took a few steps forwards, pulling out his wand in a swift motion. The muggle looked up as he neared. He turned around and took in a sharp breath at the sight of the Dark Lord.

Voldemort's crimson eyes narrowed. "Avada Kedavra," he spoke the curse in a dangerous cold voice. A familiar surge of power flowed through him as a jet of green light hit the man in chest. The muggle was dead before he hit the ground.

Voldemort eyed the dead muggle coldly. The man deserved a much more painful death. He would have enjoyed hearing the man scream, but the sound would have alerted the Aurors of Potter's location.

He walked forward until he was standing right above Potter. A foreign emotion stirred in him as he took in Potter's poor state.

'It would do you no good to be so close to me.'

Voldemort pushed away the memory that no longer belonged to him and started examining Potter. A quick glance at the handgun resting next to the dead muggle told him what had caused Potter's most serious injury. It was too close to Potter's heart for Voldemort's liking.

He analyzed his situation swiftly. There was an anti-apparition ward around the village, put up by the Aurors in an attempt to trap his Death Eaters. The Aurors were closing in, there was only one way to get both him and Potter out of this place without any confrontation…

Voldemort gritted his teeth. The thought of going to that old man's place with Potter was the last thing he wanted to do. But Potter needed medication urgently and, as much as he refused to acknowledge it, Voldemort did not want the boy to die.

He grabbed the familiar portkey from his pocket, then, ignoring the disgust and protest from the back of his mind, bent down and held Potter's broken form in his arms. His eyes glazed for an instant as the familiarity of the situation registered.

Realizing where his thoughts lingered, Voldemort tightened his grip on the stone in anger and no little frustration. But any other confusing thoughts were cast away quickly when he felt what could only be Potter's blood flowing through his hands down to the ground.

"Vado," he whispered, carrying Potter away from the living hell that he had created.

From the shadow of a near alley, a masked figure watched the scene unfold with shock and curiosity. The pair of dark eyes widened slightly when the Dark Lord held the injured Death Eater in his arms, before leaving with a portkey.

He had been surprised to see the Dark Lord striding into the village and had wondered if the Dark Lord had his own agenda that he had not shared with the Death Eaters. What he found was… interesting. Was the injured Death Eater the reason why the Dark Lord had come into the village? It seemed ridiculous; it was an understatement that the Dark Lord did not tolerant incompetence lightly. But the fact was that the Dark Lord had saved that Death Eater, the one he had yet to discover the identity of.

Noting this piece of new information, Severus Snape turned and disappeared down the dark alley, his robe billowing behind him.

Percy looked up sharply as he heard the distinct sound of someone arriving by portkey. Even though he could not see who it was from the bedroom, he knew it could only be Harry. He stood up. The boy owed him an explanation, and that explanation had better be convincing enough… somehow, Percy doubted it.

Flamel, who had been staying beside him, went to the bedroom door and gestured Percy to follow him. The old alchemist opened the door, then stopped short.

"Merlin…" he muttered.

Percy edged closer to the doorway, trying to see whatever had caused Flamel's reaction, but Flamel turned and placed his hand on Percy's shoulder to stop him.

Flamel looked at him in his eyes and said urgently, "Stay here, Percy, and don't come out under any circumstances. I promise I will explain everything to you later. Just stay here, no matter what you see and hear. Can you do that?"

Percy frowned. Flamel's tone told him something was very wrong. He started to protest, but Flamel had already gone out of the room without waiting for an answer.

Not wanting to be left in the dark anymore than he already was, Percy pushed open the door slightly and peered through it. What he saw made him freeze and he had to use all his self-control not to gasp out loud.

Standing in the middle of the living room was what could only be You-Know-Who. His appearance sent a chill down Percy's spine. He caught his breath when he saw who he was carrying in his arms.

Percy could not see Harry properly from behind the door, but Harry seemed to be seriously injured. Percy shivered as he saw the blood flowing from where the Dark Lord was holding Harry.

Voldemort placed Harry on the nearby couch, then stepped back wordlessly to let Flamel examine the boy. The old alchemist seemed to be more worried for Harry than the fact that the Dark Lord himself had just entered his house.

As confused as he was at the moment, Percy knew Harry's state could not be good. He continued to stare, dumbfounded. His mind couldn't even begin to think of how… wrong the scene before him was. He didn't know what think, nor did he know what to make of the absurdity of what he was witnessing.

"What happened?" Flamel demanded, turning from Harry to the Dark Lord, not at all caring who he was snapping to.

"He was shot, by a muggle handgun," said Voldemort in a snake-like voice after a moment of silence, stressing the word 'muggle' in obvious distaste.

Percy did not know what a handgun was, but Flamel obviously did. The alchemist paled visibly and quickly bent down over Harry. He pulled out his wand and pointed it over Harry's chest, muttering some kind of spell.

Voldemort looked on for a moment before turning away. He was reaching into his robe pocket when Flamel stopped him.

"I need some help, Tom," he called out, glancing briefly over his shoulder at the Dark Lord, before focusing back at Harry.

Tom. Flamel had mentioned that name before. It was hard to imagine that Voldemort, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, actually had a birth name. And such a… normal one at that.

The Dark Lord turned back slowly, his eyes narrowed.

"The bullet has ripped through his lung, I can't heal him myself," continued Flamel urgently.

Voldemort paused for a while, and then replied coldly, "Then that is your problem."

Flamel gritted his teeth and turned back, facing the Dark Lord fully. "You care for him enough to bring him here. Are you going to just let him die like this now? Please, Tom, I am not as good a healer as you are."

Percy blinked. Voldemort? Healer?

Voldemort's crimson eyes flashed. "I do not care what happens to him, old man," he hissed. He stopped his gaze at Harry. It was some time before he spoke again, "But he will be more useful to me alive than dead. I am not going to let him die, not yet."

With that said, the dark lord took a step forward and placed his palm on Harry's chest. Slowly, he closed his eyes and started muttering under his breath. The power radiated from the Dark Lord was so strong that Percy could feel it from a distance. He took in a sharp breath; he had never felt such a strong magical power before.

Flamel's eyes were twinkling much like Dumbledore's. "Whatever you say," he said lightly, not bothering to hide the smile on his face now that the Dark Lord was not looking his way. "I will go and get some potions."

Flamel left at Voldemort's faint nod, leaving Harry in the Dark Lord's hands.

Percy stared at the Dark Lord as he continued to heal Harry. This was the monster that had captured his father. Voldemort was alone, without any Death Eaters nearby and was currently focusing on Harry. This was as good an opportunity as anyone would get, but Percy remained where he was. If it were his other siblings, they probably would have rushed head on towards the Dark Lord, but Percy knew a lost battle when he saw one. He could sense the Dark Lord's power and he knew no one, save maybe Dumbledore, could have any hope of defeating him. Despite having been a Gryffindor, he wasn't about to head foolishly to his death.

Another reason that held him back was the fact that he could not make any sense of anything that he had just witnessed so far this night. Voldemort had apparently just saved Harry Potter's life and was currently healing him. Of course, if Harry had been working for Voldemort, he supposed it made sense. Hadn't Voldemort said Harry would be more useful to him alive than dead? But why did Percy have a feeling that there was more to it? And why was Nicolas Flamel involved? Why did he act as if he was… familiar with Voldemort? And most importantly, why did Harry Potter join the Dark Lord and betray them all?

Meanwhile Flamel had got back, carrying several vials with him. He poured the potions into Harry's mouth, careful not to interrupt the still working Dark Lord. Percy noticed that Harry had finally gained back some colour and his wounds had stopped bleeding.

Voldemort reopened his eyes after a few minutes and the power swelling in the room subsided.

"Good job, Tom, as always," Flamel commented quietly.

Voldemort narrowed his eyes. "Don't push it, Flamel," he said. "I would have killed him myself if he had shown any disloyalty."

Disloyalty. Percy felt a lump in his throat at that. So Harry had indeed become Voldemort's loyal servant?

"How could you say that?" Flamel replied quietly. "Harry did all this for you, Tom, and you knew it."

Voldemort turned his full attention to the alchemist. "Then he should suffer for his own foolishness."

"Foolishness?" Flamel echoed. He took a step closer to Voldemort, anger was clear in his voice. "You call his faith in you foolishness?"

Flamel's words seemed to have stunned the Dark Lord. "Faith," he said after a moment's silent, spitting the word in contempt. "It is just a childish dream. This blind faith clouded his judgment and played him straight into my hand. How could this not be foolishness?"

"Is this what you want, Tom?" said Flamel softly. "To push away everyone who cares for you; everyone who believe there's still something in you that's worth caring for?" He glanced at Harry briefly, then turned back to Voldemort, his voice was cold when he spoke again, "I am glad, Tom, even hopeful, about what you have done here tonight, but I can recognize the sign of a prolonged Cruciatus Curse when I see one. I have stayed out of my way in this war, but if I see you hurting him like this again, I swear I will do everything I can to stop you, even if it meant my death. Harry has suffered enough without you torturing him."

Voldemort returned Flamel's gaze coldly, before reaching into his robe and disappeared after a short incantation.

Percy let out a deep breath when he was certain that the Dark Lord had left. He pushed open the door and walked out cautiously. Flamel remained silent as he approached Harry. The alchemist seemed to still be in deep thought about what had just happened.

In any normal situation, Percy would have been amazed to see that someone would dare to threaten the Dark Lord, and actually walk away from it. But now, he supposed this was nothing compared to all that he had witnessed in the last few hours.

He stopped next to the couch and gazed down at Harry. He had known it was bad, but he still couldn't help letting out a small gasp

when he finally saw closely what state Harry was in. The boy's robe was stained in blood. There was a tiny dark hole close to his heart and a clear red mark on his neck. Harry was trembling; it was as if he had lost control over the muscles of his body, the sign of Cruciatus Curse.

"He will be all right," said Flamel softly from beside him. "But I am afraid he will suffer some serious after-effects of the Cruciatus Curse for the next few days."

Percy turned towards the alchemist. He had so many questions in his mind and he wanted all of them to be answered at once. In the end, a simple question was all that he could muster.

"What in Merlin's name is going on?" he asked weakly.

"All in good time, my child," said Flamel, giving him a small smile.

The alchemist looked very tired, but Percy was not about to leave without a proper explanation.

"Could you give me a hand in cleaning up Harry's wound, Percy? I will start explaining as we work," Flamel continued, starting to remove Harry's blood-soaked robe. "Tom has healed the most crucial injuries, but Harry's wounds still need bandaging and there are still some minor bruises on his back."

Eager to finally get some answers, Percy moved forward and took a close look at Harry's injuries. Indeed, Harry's wounds were all healed perfectly.

"Only an expert healer could heal a wound like this," Percy commented. He couldn't see how You-Know-Who, the darkest wizard in recent history, had such a skill.

Flamel sighed. "Let's just say Tom mastered it out of necessity."

Percy was trying to understand what Flamel meant when he saw something that turned his blood cold. Now that Harry's upper-body was exposed, Percy could see the Dark Mark burned in Harry's left

arm clearly. The reality that Harry was now working for the enemy hit him again in full force, causing him to stop and take a few steps back.

"Why should I help him?" he said quietly. "The Death Eaters captured my father and he is one of them."

Nicolas looked up. "Child…"

"And how can I know I can trust you? You seem to know You-Know-Who quite well," Percy continued, the fact that he was accusing a world famous alchemist only registered in his mind after the words had left his mouth.

"Yes, I knew Tom rather well. But if I am working for him, I would not have talked to him that way, now would I?" said Flamel, raising his eyebrows slightly. "As for Harry," he went on, "it is a long story that, I'm afraid, started by my own hand. I can not ask anything of you, child, only that you give Harry the benefit of the doubt for the moment. I promise I will explain everything to you as best as I can."

Percy stared at Flamel, surprised at how sincere the alchemist sounded, even after he had rudely accused him of being a Death Eater.

"No…"

Percy turned back to Harry at the weak voice. Flamel immediately focused back on Harry. He reached out and placed the back of his hand against Harry's forehead.

Flamel frowned. "He has a fever."

Percy looked on as Harry continued to mutter in his sleep.

"Please, Dad, don't… I was only trying to… I'm sorry… "

Percy closed his eyes. He could easily guess what Harry was dreaming about. Slowly, he set back to work beside Flamel. He shook his head. And he had once said that his other siblings were too trusting.

As he had anticipated, the Dark Lord was not at the meeting place yet. Severus strode towards the group of gathering Death Eaters, who were talking among themselves while waiting for the Dark Lord to return. No doubt most of them were expecting praise or rewards, seeing how successful the raid had been. Severus could already see the chaos this would cause when the news broke out tomorrow. And to think school would begin again tomorrow…

Yes, tomorrow was definitely going to be a great day, he thought sarcastically.

He approached Lucius, whose black hood had done little to hide his long blonde hair. Draco, who was standing beside his father as usual, looked up sharply when he neared. The boy seemed disappointed to see that it was him. And was that… worry that had flashed across Draco's grey eyes? Was the boy expecting someone else?

He listened in silence as Lucius started to talk about the raid. From the corner of his eyes he saw Draco tensed when Lucius described how the muggles screamed and pleaded before they died in obvious glee.

Severus was still having trouble accepting the fact that Draco had offered to spy for Albus. While he was glad that Draco had chosen not to follow his father's footstep, Severus had been alarmed to find that the boy had somehow chosen to follow his footstep instead.

No one but Severus and Albus knew about Draco's new position, since both of them could not be sure what to make of Draco's sudden change of heart and wanted to observe the boy for a while before introducing him to the Order. Apparently, someone had taught Draco how to guard his mind. It was also very possible that this was the same person who had convinced Draco to change sides and had told him that Severus was Dumbledore's spy. Severus had his own suspicion about the identity of this person, yet the question of why still remained. He glanced at his godson's stiff posture. Maybe it was time to push the boy for more answers.

All of a sudden, all whisperings ceased, indicating that the Dark Lord had finally arrived. The atmosphere in the graveyard was tense, it was clear to anyone that the Dark Lord was in a rage. Severus strengthened his mental shield, then went forward and kneeled before the Dark Lord. This was going to be a long night.

Harry opened his eyes, blinking at the brightness of his surroundings.

"Harry?" a familiar voice asked.

"Nicolas?"

His vision began to clear and he could see Nicolas's concerned face staring down at him. He closed his eyes. The images of his parents' disappointed face still lingered and he was shivering all over. Forcing down the urge to throw up, he tried to sit up. Instantly pain shot through him and caused him to hiss in pain. What happened? Why did he feel he had been broken into pieces and put back together?

As if answering his questions, memories began to rush back. And that hurt almost as much as his injuries.

It was then Harry realized exactly how much he had trusted Tom; how much he had truly believed that Tom could be redeemed. That was why being reminded of how cruel Voldemort was had hurt so much. It made Harry doubt if this was really the right choice more than ever. Perhaps it was why he had dreamed of how disappointed his parents were of his actions. What if he had done nothing but further Voldemort's power? Ever since he had known of the raid, he couldn't help but have an inkling feeling that the Dark Lord would not have decided to make his first move so quickly had Harry not joined him. What if he was the cause of all the death that night?

"Easy, child…"

He vaguely heard Nicolas' voice, struggling to keep his emotions at bay. Rage, fear, panic, and finally the longing of drifting back to the peaceful sea of unconsciousness.

With some effort, he focused back to the worried alchemist. "How… how did I get here?" he asked weakly.

Instead of answering, Nicolas brought a vial of potion up to Harry's mouth, lifting his head carefully and poured the cold liquid down his throat. The effect was immediate. Harry felt the pain fading away a little and his thoughts became clearer.

Nicolas helped him sit up. After getting a little more comfortable, but still terribly weak, Harry asked, "What happened? How did I get here?"

Nicolas pulled a chair closer and sat next to him. Looking at Harry in his eyes, he answered quietly, "Tom brought you here."

It took a while before what Nicolas had said registered in Harry's mind. "Tom... saved me?" he said numbly.

Nicolas nodded. "He brought you here and healed your most fatal wounds himself. He saved your life."

Why? Harry barely kept himself from asking out loud. Why had Tom saved him? Hadn't he shown Harry how he felt towards him with that Cruciatus Curse? Harry could still remember the pain of the curse clearly. The pain was beyond any pain that he could imagine, even greater than the time Voldemort had cast that on him after the Tournament, and Harry had thought he would surely die from it. He remembered pleading with Voldemort to stop, in hopes of ending all the pain. But the Dark Lord had merely looked on coldly, intensifying the power of the curse as he poured more of his hatred through his wand. Harry had felt clearly Voldemort's hatred towards him through the bond, and that somehow had made the pain even more unbearable.

Then why? Why had Tom saved him? What did that mean?

Just when Harry started to doubt his decision, Tom did something that… spackled his hope. True, he could easily think of several reasons for why Voldemort had saved him, but a part of him still wanted to believe that Tom's act had meant something, that it was a sign that Voldemort might still have a heart.

He was jerked out of his thought when someone put a hand on his shoulder. Nicolas looked at him with concern and understanding.

"Do you want to talk about what happened?" he asked gently.

Harry shivered at the memories. He shook his head. "I'd rather not," he said.

Nicolas nodded, patting his shoulder lightly in comfort. "Just remember I will be here if you need any help."

Harry managed a smile despite his pain. "Thank you, Nicolas."

"Now, how are you feeling?" asked Nicolas.

"I'm fine… Just a little tired, that's all," he added at Nicolas' stare.

Nicolas raised his eyebrows, before turning serious again. "Harry… do you still want to go on?" he asked quietly.

Harry closed his eyes. Did he still want to go on? Or go back to being Dumbledore's weapon and fighting against Voldemort?

That was not even a choice.

He stared into Nicolas' eyes. "I can never fight him, you know that," he answered softly.

Harry could see conflict in Nicolas' eyes, as if he was struggling with himself. Finally Nicolas sighed. "In that case," he said slowly. "You need to head back to the headquarters now."

Harry paled. "What time is it?"

"Nearly five in the morning," a deep voice replied.

Harry jumped. He turned towards the voice and watched in shock as Percy Weasley approached him. He had completely forgotten about Percy.

Percy gave him a cold look, before looking away. "We have to go now," he said simply.

Harry stared questioningly at Percy.

It was Nicolas who answered. "I told Percy of your adventure this summer."

Harry blinked, then turned back to Percy slowly.

Percy clenched his fists, but otherwise remained unmoved. "Are you ready to go?" he repeated.

Harry nodded tightly. He only took his eyes from Percy when Nicolas handed him two vials of potions.

"The blue one will help you recover your strength, drink it for the next three nights. Your wounds are mostly healed, but it will take some time for you to recover." said the alchemist. "The yellow one is for the after-effect of Cruciatus Curse." He returned Harry's startled look pointedly. "Your muscles will be sore and slow to react for at least the next few days. Take it every night for the next week and rest as much as you can. Understand?"

Harry smiled. "Yes, sir."

Nicolas gave him an amused gaze, and then helped him to his feet.

Percy walked over and placed his hand on Harry's shoulder after some hesitation. He nodded curtly at Nicolas, then said to Harry, "You still have your portkey with you, don't you?"

Harry nodded. He thanked Nicolas again before activating the portkey and traveled back to the Order's headquarter with Percy.

Harry felt the world spinning around him as he arrived in the drawing room. He struggled to stay on his feet and was surprised when Percy reached out to steady him.

Harry looked up at Percy, unsure of what to say. Percy's gaze was cold, but he still had not said a word about what had happened in this same room earlier that night.

"You better go back to your room now. Mum is going to wake up soon," said Percy.

Though Harry wanted to rest and forget everything that had happened that night more than anything, Percy's quietness unsettled him. Percy had every reason to question him, or even hex him.

"Percy…" he started.

Percy's eyes narrowed, staring straight at Harry. "I am not a Death Eater. I am not about to interrogate you when you can barely stand on your own," he said with a hint of impatience. "We will talk tomorrow before you leave."

He glanced at Harry's covered left arm for one last time, before turning around and leaving Harry alone in the room.

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this an entire chapter and leave the Hogwarts part next time. (That's why the chapter finally does not end in a cliffhanger this time…)

Please Review!

Chapter 18: A Forced Gamble

Percy sat alone in the almost empty headquarters, reading the newest issue of the Daily Prophet with only half his mind on it. To say the world was in a panic would be an understatement. The muggle world was in chaos, no one knew what had happened to reduce a whole village into ruins overnight, with none of the villagers left alive. The wizarding world was not fairing any better. He glanced at the front page of the Daily Prophet. "The Ministry finally announced to the public that You-Know-Who has returned, after six months of delay," Percy thought grimly with a sudden surge of shame.

"Are you going back to the Ministry today, dear?"

"I have to go back soon after breakfast, Mum. I will be needed to take care of things there," Percy answered his mother as a plate of fried eggs materialized in front of him.

In fact, Percy should have gone back to the Ministry by now, but there was someone he needed to talk to first.

He had been trying to decide what he should do with Harry Potter ever since he had come back to the headquarters with the boy earlier. Nicolas Flamel had given him a lengthy account of events that involved time travel, changing identity and a boy called Tom Riddle. Over the night, Percy found himself knowing more about this war they were having than anyone else in the order or in the Ministry. And now, to his shame, he was at a loss of what he should do with all the startling information he had learned several hours ago.

Percy still had a hard time believing what Flamel had told him. Whatever Percy had expected, it had not been such a far-fetched explanation. But the regrets and guilt in Flamel's voice didn't seem to be an act, and it did explain some of what Percy had witnessed last night.

Time travel. Percy shook his head slightly. He couldn't believe that the world-famous alchemist had kept his research in the dark. Unauthorized time travel was highly illegal. Over the centuries, any attempt to travel through time had been tightly monitored by the

Ministry since tampering with time could easily turn out to be disastrous; and it had.

If what Flamel had said was true, then it meant that Harry had spent a year in the past without anyone noticing. By the cruelty of fate, Harry had unknowingly befriended the monster who would one day kill his parents and ruined countless others' lives. When Harry returned to the present, he had chosen his new 'friend' over all those who had cared for him, all based on a promise and a belief that had been proven untrue time and time again.

Percy messaged his temple as he recalled what Flamel had said about the reason for Harry becoming a Death Eater. It was… naïve and ridiculous, to say the least.

He was shaken out of his thoughts when the familiar high-pitch scream of Black's mother reached his ears. Hermione emerged from the stairs with Ginny, followed by Ron… and Harry.

Harry was in much better shape than he had been the night before, or at least he was trying to appear as such. The boy still looked very weak and tired, but no one would have guessed how close he had been to death only a few hours ago.

Harry's eyes flickered over to where Percy was for a moment before he sat down next to the kitchen table, right between Ron and Hermione. Percy forced himself to return his attention to his untouched breakfast. He would hear what Harry had to say before deciding what he would do.

That was not easy though. The memory of seeing the tattoo on the boy's arm was still fresh in Percy's mind. Now, watching his mother fussing over the boy about his well-being and his siblings sitting around the table, Percy found himself tensing unconsciously.

There was a Death Eater in their midst, and he was so close to Percy's own family! His mother looked so concerned over Harry's weakened state. She had no idea what Harry had done and what Percy had seen with his own eyes.

Percy sat straighter and tried to relax. He needed to calm down. There was nothing Harry could do in the middle of the Order's Headquarter.

He tried to tune down the chatting sound coming from Harry's side of the table and focused on organizing his own thoughts. He waited patiently for Harry to finish his breakfast, having abandoned his own finally, and walked over to where the boy was seated before anyone ushered him away.

"A word, Harry?" he asked politely in what he thought as a natural tone.

Harry looked up at him, then he nodded wordlessly and stood up to follow Percy.

Percy led Harry to his own room, ignoring the curious gazes that fell on them as they left the kitchen.

Percy locked the door and placed a silencing charm on it before turning around to face Harry.

"What are you thinking, Harry?" Percy began. "Do you have any idea what you have done?"

Harry looked away. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"Are you?" Percy couldn't stop the bitter words, nor could he conceal the anger in his voice. "You joined him willingly, and Merlin knows what you've done for him. You said you are sorry? If I hadn't found out last night, you would have continued to serve him while cheating everyone here, wouldn't you?"

The boy's silence was as good an answer as any.

"How could you?" Percy shook his head. "How could you betray us like this? What about Ron? Would you have killed him if your… master," he spat the word in disgust, "asked you to?"

"I won't," the reply was immediate. "I'll die before that."

Percy didn't expect to hear such a resolute answer from the boy. "Still, you've killed for him," he said quietly.

Harry visibly flinched at that, confirming Percy's dreaded suspicion. "Who?" he asked tentatively.

"Hestia Jones," Harry answered softly after a moment of silence.

Percy remembered hearing that name mentioned by some of the order members. Hestia Jones, a member of the Order of the Phoenix and an Auror.

Percy rubbed his temple. "The things you've done are considered heavy crimes by the Ministry."

"I know," said Harry quietly.

Percy was starting to feel frustrated at the boy's calm response. Didn't he understand what kind of mess he had gotten himself into?

"I don't understand." he said. "Why ruin your life because of this? He is the monster that has destroyed your life, Harry, not your friend. He deserves to die." There was no need to explain which he Percy was referring to.

A pained look crossed Harry's eyes. "That's the only way to bring him back. I have to try."

Percy gritted his teeth. "That's nonsense," he said, echoing himself at the time when Flamel told him why Harry had joined Voldemort.

"That's… nonsense! Harry became a Death Eater because-" He shook his head, unable to believe what he had just heard. "Because he wants to… redeem You-Know-Who?"

Percy couldn't understand. After all the crimes that monster had committed, all the lives he had destroyed. How could anyone,

especially Harry, think of redeeming him? But even so, it still didn't explain why Harry joined the Dark Lord. It made no sense at all.

"Harry shares a bond with Tom. They can feel each other's emotions as if the emotions are their own," said Flamel before Percy could voice his thoughts, "Years of training under a master of Dark Arts has twisted Tom's mind. It has ripped away his compassion, his ability to feel and to care for the lives around him. Yes, he could do that once," Flamel said at Percy's expression. "Harry believes that if he can make Tom feels again, he can stop Voldemort, and stop the war altogether."

Percy tried to comprehend what he's just been told. "Then Harry joined You-Know-Who because-"

Flamel looked old and tired as he continued in a soft voice, "Because Harry wants to feel for Tom, to force him to remember his old-self."

Percy was at a loss of words. That's insane! Harry and Flamel had lost their minds. Could they understand what they had been doing? What Harry had done so far was enough to earn him a life sentence in Azkaban, and Flamel was supporting him?

It had taken Percy a long time to figure out why Flamel had not stopped Harry when he first found out what Harry had done and had even provided help for the boy to keep his secrets. In the end of the conversation he had had with Flamel, he finally understood. Flamel had the same belief as Harry. For whatever reason, or perhaps pure insanity, they both believed that Voldemort, a ruthless monster who wouldn't even blink when he ordered the annihilation of a village, could be 'brought back'.

Percy knew he had to end this madness once and for all. It was his job to hand Harry over to the Ministry. Surely his family would understand him this time? Harry was a danger to them all.

Percy stared back at Harry. The boy still looked awfully weak and seemed to be having some trouble simply standing up right. Percy hesitated. What he was about to do would mean a life-time of imprisonment for Harry.

"Just do what you have to do." Harry looked straight at Percy.

"Don't you have anything to say for yourself?" said Percy, surprised that the boy didn't even protest.

"I never intend to walk away from what I've done," said Harry.

Percy sighed. "Why are you sacrificing so much for him?" he said, feeling exasperated at the boy's unwavering loyalty to his… 'friend'. "Even if you do succeed in… bringing him back," Percy couldn't believe he was actually saying that, "he will never be allowed to live. It doesn't make any difference in the end whether he is redeemed or not."

It seemed a cruel thing to say, but that was the truth. Harry's effort was deemed to be wasted, no matter he succeed or not in the end. It was a gamble with no chance of winning to begin with.

Harry remained silent for a long time before replying, "No, it makes all the difference, even if the end result maybe the same for the world." Harry trailed off at that. He paused for a moment before continuing softly, "The Tom I knew would never allow himself to die as a monster… nor will I. Besides," A grim expression appeared on Harry's face. "I don't think the order, even with the support of the Ministry, can stop him that easily. I saw them destroy nearly every single life and build in that village within two hours last night, and he hasn't even started to send out the dementors yet." Harry looked up at Percy, a haunted look slipped pass the boy's mask of indifference and into his eyes for a split second. "I understand very well what he's done, Percy, but I can't bring myself to fight him. I… I'm not saying what I've done is right, it's downright foolish to begin with, but this is really the only way I can help to stop this war, though maybe there's little hope to succeed even from the start."

Percy sighed. As a Ministry officer and a member of the Order of the Phoenix, he had no doubt what he had to do. But something made him hesitate. What Flamel had said to him shortly before Harry had returned affected him more than he would like to believe.

"Harry wants Tom to remember the person he used to be, but it seems that Harry's own well-being is affecting Voldemort more than they both have expected." Flamel gave Percy a slight smile. "My old friend Albus believes that Voldemort can't love, but that's not true. Tom Riddle almost never let anyone near him as an act to protect himself and he grew up to believe that love is a weakness, but that doesn't mean he can't love. As far as I know, only four have witnessed Voldemort caring for another and showing compassion. Harry, myself, a Slytherin boy who I believe died during Voldemort's first raise," Flamel paused and looked up at Percy, "and you."

True, Voldemort had rescued Harry and healed him, but it was all because Voldemort believed that Harry could be of use in the future, wasn't it? Though all he had heard about the Dark Lord told him that Voldmoert never bothered to save his followers, Percy refused to consider the possibility of the other explanation. Perhaps Percy didn't really want to think of what it would imply if Voldemort really had rescued Harry out of… friendship. Even the thought itself seemed ridiculous.

But Percy also knew what Harry had said was true. If the whole argument he'd had with his family had taught Percy anything, it was to open his eyes to the fact that the Ministry had its flaws and limits. The Ministry was capable of taking care of everything most of the time, but there were times when laws and regulations couldn't solve a problem, and war was one of those times. Percy was ashamed to find that he was willing to try if there was a way to stop the war, to turn everything back to normal. He would make sure that Harry would face the responsibility of his actions, but he also wanted to see the changes Harry's plan would bring about. It was very possible that it might all be for nothing, but Percy couldn't shake the memory of Voldemort carrying a deeply wounded Harry in his arms, searching for help and ending up healing the boy himself. Percy didn't want to end Harry's work so cruelly, especially if the boy was actually making some progress. Maybe it was not that wrong to wait and observe for little bit longer.

"I can let you continue with your… plan, but you have to promise me several things," he said finally.

Time crawled slowly for Harry the whole day. The ride to King's Cross by Knight Bus was a nightmare in his weakened state. The trip back to Hogwarts was not any easier, either. Harry knew his injuries were serious and he knew he had been close to death when Voldemort brought him to Nicolas last night. Trying to act normal and to hide his injuries was almost impossible.

The train ride back to Hogwarts seemed endless. It was still at least two hours before they would reach the castle. The ride was uneventful so far, expect for the usual visit from Draco Malfoy soon after the train had departed.

Draco had bumped into their compartment as usual with Crabbe and Goyle. He'd had a sneer firmly in place, though Harry had known the blonde long enough to catch him relaxing upon seeing Harry, though weak, but apparently alive.

Draco had left without causing much of a fuss, but the small display of concern had been enough to lift Harry's spirit a little.

Harry closed his eyes, attempting to ease the nausea caused by the train movement, which was getting steadily worse.

"Harry? Are you sure you are all right?" asked Hermione, who was sitting across from him.

Looking up, Harry gave Hermione a small smile. "I'm fine. I just had a bad night."

"Do you think it might have something to do with the attack last night?" asked Ron from beside him, referring to the nightmares Harry had mentioned during summer.

Harry forced the images of the raid from his mind. "No," he answered. "I just had trouble going to sleep last night. It's nothing."

Noticing how tired Harry was, Ron and Hermione both let Harry have the rest he so obviously needed.

Sensing his friends concerned, Harry felt the now familiar guilt piercing him. He felt sick for lying to his friends over and over again. And what Percy had said to him weighed heavily upon him.

To Harry's astonishment, Percy had chosen not to hand him over - for the time being, of course. Percy had made him take an oath, not one as deadly as the unbreakable vow, but a magical oath all the same. It would alert the caster if the oath was broken.

The content of the oath was simple: Harry was not to use what he had learned about the order to the benefit of the Dark Lord and he was not to hurt any of Percy's family under any circumstances.

Those were things Harry never intended to do even without the oath. What troubled him the most was the last thing that Percy had asked him to do. He understood why Percy had had such a request, but it was… hard.

"Stay away from them, Harry. Regardless of what your intention is, as long as you are loyal to… him, I can't let you stay close to my family, or anyone in this house for that matter. You can't stay in between any longer, you have to choose. The way you are acting now is no different than a spy."

The realization that Percy was right hadn't come easy for Harry. He had been selfish to think that he could maintain his friendship with Ron and Hermione this year with everything he'd done without them knowing. But it was becoming clearer and clearer that he could no longer live as both Harry and Alex.

He remembered during his fourth year, Dumbledore had said that a time would come when everyone would have to choose a side. The attack last night indicated that that time was approaching soon. Voldemort was declaring war and soon there would be no place to hide; everyone would have to make their choice.

Harry knew that there was no longer a choice for him. He had gone too far by now. He would have to walk the road he had chosen to the end, even if it meant he would end up all alone.

"Evanesco," Severus emptied the caldron before him with a wave of his wand. "Ten points from Gryffindor for your obvious inability to read and understand simple instructions, Longbottom. There is no need for you to make another attempt."

It was the first day of class after Christmas holidays and having to teach the fifth year Slytherin-Gryffindor class was doing little to lift Severus' foul mood. He strode passed the boy to inspect the potion of the next student, not sparing a glance as Longbottom hastily packed his belongings.

"Five points for talking in class, Miss Granger," he snapped without turning around as he heard the distinctive voice of Granger comforting Longbottom.

Shaking off the feelings that something was amiss with the class today, Severus stopped beside Potter's caldron. After the past few months, he was no longer surprised to find the brat managed to brew the potion correctly.

With the recent development of the war, Severus had let the issue of Potter's strange behavior slip from his mind. Though Potter's sudden change in attitude and his secret correspondence with his godson demanded attention, Severus saw no reason to waste more time on that spoilt brat when he had much more pressing matters to attend to.

As Severus continued to watch the boy, he noticed how stiff Potter's movement seemed to be. Drops of sweat had formed on his forehead as if he was struggling to keep standing and stirring at the same time. Potter's behavior reminded Severus of his own state whenever he tried to brew potions after receiving a Cruciatus from the Dark Lord.

Potter suffering from Cruciatus was not possible, of course. Albus' 'golden boy' was safely kept in the Order headquarter, far away from the horror Severus was forced to be a part of. No doubt the brat had stayed up all night with his friends, enjoying the Christmas holidays to

the very last second and tiring himself due to lack of sleep or due to whatever drinks he had consumed.

"If you can't control your own hands, Potter, remove yourself from my classroom before you blow up your caldron," he said when drops of unfinished potion spilled out from Potter's caldron as the boy accidentally hit the edge of the caldron hard while stirring his potion.

Severus could hear the expected snickers coming from the Slytherin half of the class, but it died down as quickly as it began. It was than Severus was able to pinpoint exactly what was different with the class today.

His Slytherins were unusually quiet. They acted as if they were waiting for something, or perhaps, observing something.

It was Potter, Severus concluded near the end of the class. It was easy to miss, but the glances his Slytherins sent towards Potter every now and then didn't escape Severus. Curiously, the glances were more… calculating than the usual contemplating.

Not all Slytherins were acting this way, but those who did, Severus noticed, were all the offspring of current Death Eaters, more precisely, Death Eaters who were in the Dark Lord's Inner Circle.

Severus knew that some Death Eaters, especially those who came from noble families and those in the Inner Circle, often passed on inside information to their sons or daughters. It was safe to assume that some of his Slytherins had learned of something from their parents during the holidays. And whatever that was, it seemed to be concerning Potter.

It was strange and disturbing at the same time. Severus was a member of the Inner Circle, yet he could not remember the Dark Lord mentioning anything about the brat for the past several months. Had he interpreted the situation wrongly? Or was it as he had feared, that his loyalty was doubted to such an alarming level?

Whatever the case, Albus would want him to investigate if his 'golden boy' was concerned. Maybe he would learn more from Draco when he talked with the boy later that night.

"Idiot. The way you spoke to the Dark Lord was simply asking for torture."

"Quit that, Draco, you've emphasized your point more than enough."

Draco looked undignified for a second before sighing. "Are you all right?"

Harry smiled tiredly. "I'll live."

He closed his eyes and lay down on the wonderfully soft cushion. He was exhausted after a whole day of lessons. A sudden movement of the cushion beside him told him Draco had done the same. Through the fake galleon, the two of them had decided to meet in the secret room of Hogwarts' Army after classes that day.

Dumbledore was quick in replacing Umbridge after the Ministry had finally declared the return of Voldemort. Now with Moody as their Defense Professor, there was little need for them to continue their defense group. Despite all that had happened during the past four months, Harry could still feel a faint sense of accomplishment at what the HA members had learned from the small club. They had covered several useful hexes as well as some defense techniques. They had even started the Patronus charm shortly before the holidays.

Harry knew Draco had felt the same way, though the blonde would never express it. Most of the HA members, though they could probably never fully trust the blonde, had finally accepted Draco as part of the group. They had all seen that Draco was indeed very skilled in defense and, as time went by, accepted that and was willing to learn what the Slytherin had to offer.

Hermione had suggested that they should continue the group earlier that day. Though Harry had told her he would think about it, he knew

both he and Draco would refuse to continue their leadership of the defense group. It was simply wrong for two Death Eaters, loyal or not, to be the leaders of a Defense Against the Dark Arts group.

"They knew about you," said Draco suddenly. "Pansy, Crabbe, Goyle and Nott"

Harry pushed himself up with some difficulty and turned to look down at Draco. There was no need to ask what those four knew about Harry.

"How?"

Draco shrugged. "Their parents told them."

"So that's why they seem to be acting… differently towards me today."

"Don't worry," said Draco casually. "Your secret is safe with them, despite what you might think."

"I know," said Harry, a weak smile playing on his lips. "I was a Slytherin once, remember?"

Draco smirked, though his amusement didn't reach his eyes. Harry knew he was not the only one in the room who was injured in the raid last night. Draco was hurt as much as he was. Draco hadn't told him what had really happened, Harry could only gather that it had something to do with the blonde's father. Whatever Lucius Malfoy had done, it had shaken Draco greatly.

"Severus is suspicious though," Draco continued. "He saw the Dark Lord rescuing you. And you can only imagine how interested the old coot was to the 'newest Death Eater in the Inner Circle'."

Harry nodded. Draco had told him that Snape had stayed in the village until the very last moment and had witnessed what had transpired between him and the Dark Lord. With both Snape and Dumbledore after him, Harry knew he would not be able to stay hidden for long.

"It won't be long before they figure out what has happened," he muttered.

Harry knew Dumbledore would find out sooner or later. But what would happen then? Would Dumbledore send him straight to Azkaban? Or would he mold him back into the weapon he was prophesied to be? Somehow, the latter seemed more frightening.

"I'm going to meet with Severus later, I suppose I can try to buy you some time, at least to draw their suspicion away from you," said Draco slowly. "I won't promise anything though, and the rest is really up to you."

Harry blinked and turned to face the blonde. "Are you sure you should help me like this? You're supposed to be on Dumbledore's side… aren't you?" he finished lamely.

Draco calmly pushed himself to a sitting position and reached up to tidy his hair. "Most of the time, yes," he said, smirking, "when the old coot is the only one who can make use of my information."

Severus sat calmly in his office, eyeing his godson who was sitting opposite from him. The room was heavily warded, so there was no chance for anyone to eavesdrop on their conversation.

Draco's face was guarded, though Severus could sense his godson's distress. It would take some time before Draco could recover from his experience of the raid and there was really nothing Severus could do to help.

Maybe tonight was not the best time to question Draco, but with the Dark Lord displaying his power and openly declaring war, the situation had suddenly gotten more desperate. As much as Severus wanted to protect his godson, Draco's motive of spying for the order was vague and the order could not afford having someone who might be the Dark Lord's agent among them in a time like this.

"What's this meeting for, Uncle Severus?" asked Draco. "I've already made my report on what's happened last night to Dumbledore this morning."

"I know, and I'm not going to ask you about the raid." Severus noticed Draco's tensed shoulder relaxed slightly at that. "What I want to know," he continued slowly, locking eyes with his godson, "is why you decided to spy for the headmaster."

"I've already said that I don't want to follow my father's path." Draco's expression remained guarded.

"But who convinced you to be a spy? Who taught you Occlumency and Legilimency? Someone has told you that I am a spy. And I'm sure you understand that I need to know who that is."

"My source would not leak the information to anyone."

Severus eyed his godson. "It's Potter, isn't it?"

"What made you think-" Draco paused for a while, before sighing and said, "Yes, it's him."

Severus raised his eyebrows at the swift admission.

"Potter came to find me several days after the night you talked to me about my initiation; he was having... remedial potions with you that night. Potter seemed to have some idea on what's going on and started babbling about how I should make the right choice. He said that I didn't have to do what my father told me to and that I could always ask for Dumbledore's protection if I refuse to join the Dark Lord," said Draco. "He seemed rather determined to convince me out of it, saying that he didn't want anyone to join the Dark Lord if he can stop it. When I refused to seek Dumbledore for help, he told me that I could be a spy instead. It seemed to be the perfect solution at that time, despite it was Potter who suggested it." There was hint of distaste in Draco's voice.

So Severus' suspicion was correct. He was surprised to hear that Potter had actually tried to help Draco so actively, but perhaps the

boy was merely trying to seek Albus' attention. Convincing a student to take the right path? Yes, Albus would be so proud of his 'golden boy' doing such a 'noble' act. Severus snorted inwardly. Gryffindors.

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"Potter has made me promise not to tell anyone, he seemed reluctant to let anyone know he was associating with a Slytherin." Draco sneered in contempt. "Not that it matters much," Draco shrugged, "but there's no need to boost Potter's ego in front of Dumbledore."

Severus fully agreed with that. It was typical of Potter to do such thing. Severus should have known it was impossible for Potter to be anything but an arrogant Gryffindor like his father. Still, there's one question left.

"Then was Potter the one who taught you Occlumency and Legilimency?"

"Of course not," Draco replied, looking rather undignified at that suggestion. "I don't need Potter to teach me anything."

That was true. Severus knew for a fact that Draco would not have let Potter teach him anything, but was it possible for Draco to learn both skills in such a short time without any guidance?

"It was not easy," Draco continued as if knowing what Severus was thinking, "but I knew I would have to learn them before the Dark Lord summoned me again." Draco smiled grimly. "And that thought helped."

Severus frowned. "Why didn't you tell anyone about your decision? You waited until after your first summons before approaching the headmaster and me. I could have helped you with Occlumency and Legilimency if you had told me earlier."

"I wanted to wait until I could guard my mind before approaching the headmaster," said Draco, apparently knowing that Albus was a Legilimens. "Besides, Potter didn't tell me you were also a spy until I'd learned both skills."

Severus nodded, accepting the answer. At least that brat had some sense left in what he called a brain. Still, Severus felt the need to ensure that Potter knew when to keep his mouth shut.

Since they were speaking of Potter, Severus asked if Draco had heard of anything about the brat from the Dark Lord or his father.

"Why would the Dark Lord mention anything about Potter?" Draco replied, still oblivious to the prophecy.

Deciding he'd learned enough from Draco, Severus continued to talk with his godson in a more relaxed manner for some time. Both were concerned at how well-established the Dark Lord's force appeared to be and both knew they were in for a long hard war.

It was late at night when Draco finally left. Severus watched thoughtfully as his godson left his office. Draco had revealed more than he had expected. It seemed he was not as close to Potter as Severus had thought.

Something didn't add up though. Severus remembered the time when he overheard Draco's conversation with Potter in the Dungeons, that was long before Draco's initiation was mentioned. Why had Draco hidden that fact?

He shook his head. What had happened between Potter and his godson was of no importance at the moment. It worried him that even Draco was aware of the Dark Lord's mistrust towards him. Was it safe for him to continue spying?

In an attempt to clear the disturbing thoughts, Severus retreated to his personal lab and busied himself with brewing the potions Pomfrey had requested.

Yet despite Severus' effort, the conversation he'd had with Draco continued to replay itself in Severus' mind for the whole night. The feeling of deception lingered at the edge of his mind for a long time, unable to be shaken off.

Chapter 19: Unsettling Silence

Albus closed his eyes and leaned back on his chair, letting out a tired sigh. It was only in the solitude of his office that he allowed himself to display any kind of weariness. It would do no good to worry his stuff and students further.

It was the last weekend of February, nearly two months since Voldemort's attack on that muggle village. The world had been living in fear ever since. The Ministry of Magic was in a dangerously unstable state. Under public pressure, Cornelius Fudge was dismissed soon after he finally announced to the world that the Dark Lord had indeed returned. As much as Albus had agreed that Cornelius was far from the best choice of a Minister, it could not have been a worse time for a major power shift in the Ministry, which was facing more pressure than ever before.

Fear and confusion, Albus could see how delicate the wizarding world was at the moment; and he knew Voldemort could see that as well. It would not surprise Albus if this was the whole point of that elaborate attack two months ago. While the wizarding world was taking its time to recover itself, Albus knew Tom Riddle well enough to know that a much larger-scaled attack was coming, one that would mark the beginning, or the continuation, of the war.

Both Severus and Draco were unable to find out what the Dark Lord was planning; all they knew was that Voldemort's force was growing alarmingly fast. Even though Hagrid was able to convince the giants to stay neutral, the situation was not as hopeful in the case of werewolves, despite Remus' best effort. There were also the dementors and inferi, both of which were forces that could crush a whole group of well-trained Aurors. Then there were the Death Eaters. Since the raid, many had been driven to join Voldemort out of fear, or power, just like what had happened last time. It saddened Albus to hear that at least five or six children, most of whom were Slytherins, had joined the Dark Lord. The identities of those children were easily known through Draco's connection among the Slytherin house, but there were also a few hidden, just as young Peter Pettigrew had once been.

The other students were acting as lively as usual, though there seemed to be a weight hanging over them ever since Voldemort's return had been announced. The many empty seats in the Great Hall during meal time served as a constant reminder of the danger they were now facing. Parents were pulling their children out of school, and there was little Albus could do. It was only after serious consideration that Albus had decided to let the students visit Hogsmeade today.

His eyes fell onto the entrance of his office as the wards alerted him that someone had just gained entrance from the guarding gargoyle. Albus wondered who his visitor could be. Mineva? Severus? For a brief second he wondered if it was news that something had happened in Hogsmeade before reassuring himself that someone would have informed him with a Patronus long ago if it was anything that serious.

He waited for a moment, but his visitor still had yet to appear. Waving his wand, Albus checked the ward again to identify whoever had activated the gargoyle. What he found was unexpected.

Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley? Most likely something concerning Harry then. Curious, Albus decided to find out what the two members of the Gryffindor trio was doing.

The moment Albus went out of his office, he could hear two faint voices arguing at the bottom end of the stairs.

"He told us to keep it a secret, remember?"

"You knew how distanced he has been recently, Ron. He always went away alone and he hardly even talked to us. He told us to keep that a secret, but something must have gone wrong with whatever he is doing."

"He would have told us if it's anything that serious."

"I am not so sure about that. He's been acting so… different this year. Something is wrong and Professor Dumbledore would want to know about that."

"I'm not about to betray my friend like that, Hermione. Besides, how do you know if Dumbledore didn't already know? He knows about everything after all, surely he would know about something this big?"

"But what if Harry is in danger and the Headmaster is too occupied with the war to notice? Harry is in more danger than any of us now and you know how easily he could get into trouble, Ron."

There was a pause before Ron replied, with a hint of resignation, "I have nothing to with this."

The conversation ceased, leaving Albus intrigued and concerned with what he had just heard. Deciding that it was time to let his presence be known, he descended the stairs until the two students came into view. They were obviously surprised to see him there.

"Ms. Granger, Mr. Weasley," greeted Albus, smiling warmly. "Shouldn't you be enjoying your time at Hogsmeade?"

Ron and Hermione exchanged a glance, then the girl spoke up, "There's something we want to tell you, Professor… about Harry."

Harry wandered around Hogsmeade, feeling better than he had felt for weeks.

So far, he hadn't bought anything, but merely spending some time outside of Hogwarts had helped him to relieve some of his stress.

The last two months had been… hard. The realization Harry had upon Percy's warning led him to distance himself even further from his Gryffindor friends. Though Harry had not felt as close to his two Gryffindor friends ever since his return from the past, it hurt to pull away from two of his best friends like that.

By pulling further and further away from the world he once knew as Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived, the hopelessness of his current situation only seemed to have intensified.

Lost in his dark thoughts, Harry jumped as he heard an unfamiliar voice hissing his name from behind him. Kicking himself for being caught unaware, Harry turned around sharply and immediately identified the figure standing a few feet behind him.

"Nott."

Harry regarded the boy cautiously, not knowing what to expect from the Slytherin. He knew that Theodore Nott had joined the Death Eaters a week ago, along with two other Slytherins from another year. Unlike Lucius Malfoy, Nott's father was not influential enough to put his son straight into Voldemort's inner circle like Draco had been.

"Put you hand away from your wand, Potter, I'm not about to attack you," said Nott almost lazily. "It's… unnecessary, isn't it."

Knowing the Slytherin was testing for his reaction, Harry carefully kept his expression guarded.

Nott regarded Harry with open curiosity. "I always wonder what he's done to turn you," he muttered, then shrugged. Making sure that no one else was walking down the alley, Nott took a few steps towards Harry and went on quietly, "Granger and Weasley have spent nearly an hour in Dumbledore's office this morning. And I heard them arguing something about you and your secrets before Dumbledore called them in. I'm sure you'd find this… interesting." With that said, Nott walked past Harry and disappeared around the corner.

Harry stared after his unexpected informant. There was only one reason for Nott to help him. The Slytherins, specifically those who knew Harry secretly bore the Dark Mark through their parents, had been observing him closely for the past two months. As annoying as it was, Harry knew that they had been judging him and it seemed they had finally decided to include him in their undercover team at Hogwarts, at least temporarily. It was… unsettling, to say the least.

Thinking back on what he had just learned, Harry found that the news had not come as very much of a shock to him. Perhaps deep down, he had known that it was only a matter of time before the two

Gryffindors would pass on the information to Dumbledore. He couldn't muster any anger towards Ron and Hermione. He didn't have the right to be angry, not when he had betrayed them far more deeply than they had him.

Shaking his head, Harry let his feet carry him out of the alley to the main street, his mind occupied with thoughts of how to deal with the inevitable questioning from Dumbledore.

He knew exactly what Ron and Hermione had told the Headmaster, which could not be much, even if they had told Dumbledore everything Harry had told them. Even if Dumbledore knew he had traveled back in time, Harry doubted the Headmaster could connect the whole thing to one Alex Salutor, especially since 'Alex' was only an unfortunate boy who had suffered from amnesia as far as Dumbledore was concerned.

Still, Harry knew better than to underestimate Albus Dumbledore. It would not be long before everything came out. Time was running out. Harry could only hope he could stop the regrets he kept feeling over his choice when the time came.

Albus stood next to the window in his office, deep in thought. With Voldemort's return, he had taken up the role as the leader of the Order once again and that had taken up most of his time aside from running the school. He admitted that this year, he had not paid as much attention to Harry as he had done for the past four years.

Albus had feared he might have neglected the boy's needs this year, but Harry had proven himself capable of taking care of himself and those around him. Severus had told him that it was Harry who had convinced Draco not to follow his father's footsteps. Albus couldn't be more proud of Harry with his noble action, especially since he knew Draco had been Harry's rival for years.

It was why what Harry's friends had just told him had come as such a shock. Severus had already told him months ago that Harry had changed and that the boy was hiding something, yet Albus had not

noticed anything particularly different about the boy. Harry had grown and become more mature, yes, but that was normal after all the boy had gone through. He had no idea that something so serious had happened over the summer.

Time travel. It was supposedly impossible in terms of magic and human's physical capability; at least that was what everyone tended to believe. Albus knew that there had been several attempts at this dangerous yet intriguing adventure, but as far as he knew, none of them had succeeded, until now.

Albus wondered why Harry hadn't told anyone about this. While he knew the boy had kept a number of his misadventures from him in the past few years, Harry always knew which matter was serious enough that an adult should be informed. But this time, Harry had deliberately kept the whole thing a secret. It had been months after the incident when Harry finally told his two best friends, whom he used to share everything with. And even then, it was only in very vague terms.

According to Ms. Granger and Mr. Weasley, Harry's memories had been erased when he traveled back in time. He had assumed another identity in the past and had been using that identity secretly after he had returned. Though Albus had comforted the two Gryffindors, telling them that Harry only needed time to recover from whatever he had experienced in the past, he was deeply concerned with the boy's condition himself. Harry's distancing from his friends was worrying, seeing as the three had grown to be so close after the last four years. It must be caused by Harry's traveling to the past, but what exactly had happened? If Harry really had no memory of his present-self during his time in the past, anything could have happened.

Suddenly Albus found himself lacking answers to many questions. How had the whole incident happened? Which point in time had Harry traveled to? More importantly, what had Harry been doing in the last few months with the identity he had acquired in the past? Why was he so insistent to keep everything in the dark?

A part of Albus urged him to question the boy while another part, the part of him that was the Headmaster of Hogwarts, told him to wait and observe. Since the early stage of his teaching career, Albus had

made a point to let his students make their own choices and let them have as much freedom as possible, since he knew there was no better way to learn than through trial and error. He preferred to let his students come to him, instead of the other way around.

Harry had never disappointed him in the last four years. He even managed to surprise him several times, displaying a kind of courage that would certainly make James and Lily proud. He was eager to know what Harry was doing, but would it be safe to just wait and observe for the time being?

Harry was surprised that no one had summoned him up to the Headmaster's office after he had headed back to Hogwarts. Instead, he found himself under full observation from the old wizard during dinner that night, making him wonder if a quick interrogation might have been more preferable. The few times Harry tried to look up at the head table, he found himself staring into the eyes of his Headmaster. Even though Harry was rather confident with his Occlumency, he still couldn't shake off the feeling that the pair of blue eyes seemed to be staring right through him, scanning for the many secrets Harry was hiding. Harry couldn't help but wonder exactly how much Dumbledore knew of his situation and how much the old wizard knew of his connection with Voldemort.

Tensing unintentionally at that thought, Harry forced himself to focus back on his meal. He was sitting at the far end of the Gryffindor table during dinner that night, with Hermione and Ron sitting across from him. Even if Harry didn't already know what had happened, it would be hard to miss the nervous look Ron kept sending his way. Hermione was eating calmly as usual, though Harry could spot her glancing up at the head table when she thought he wasn't looking. Despite the cheerful chattering around him, Harry couldn't have felt more alone.

The suffocating atmosphere made Harry lose his appetite. He quickly cleared away his current dish before grabbing his bag and left the Great Hall, well aware of the three pairs of eyes watching his every move.

Harry passed by several students that were just heading for dinner and fled to the solitude of his own hiding place. Noting that no one was following him, he paced back and forth in the deserted corridor and waited for the door of the Room of Requirement to appear, the one place he still hadn't told anyone about.

Opening the door, Harry stepped into the room and locked the entrance with a strong spell. To say this room was not a pleasant place was an understatement. Books and dummies could be found around the room. In a corner of it, right next to a large bookshelf, was a cabinet filled with spiders.

It was his training room. He had spent many nights here before to prepare himself for whatever might happen when he went to see the Dark Lord for the first time.

Harry shivered. Though he had grown quite accustomed to this room, it still sent chills down his spine every time he came in here. The atmosphere in this room was a complete contrast to the Great Hall. It was quiet, cold… and dark. The founders, with the exception of Slytherin, would probably be rolling in their graves if they knew how he had been using this room. It was the place he had taught himself the one thing that could help him gain a place near Voldemort and help him survive in the Dark Lord's rank - Dark Arts, or more precisely, the Unforgivables.

Harry shook his head. He knew he would soon lose himself in his dark thoughts if he didn't find something to distract himself soon. Pulling out some parchment from his bag, Harry stumbled to the desk that had mysteriously materialized in the middle of the room and started to write his potions essay. It was not the best of places, but Harry had gotten used to studying in here. At least he didn't have to deal with the suspicious gazes here.

Days dragged by in similar fashion until March approached. On the first weekend of the month, Harry woke up and immediately knew that something was wrong. The twisted pleasure he was feeling at the

moment could only be coming from Voldemort, and that couldn't mean anything good. The first time he had felt this way, hundreds of muggles had been killed. The second time, which was merely two weeks ago, he learned from Draco that the majority of the werewolves, lead by someone called Greyback, had agreed to assist the Dark Lord. Harry didn't need to be a Seer to know that something horrible was going to happen today.

Not feeling like having breakfast, Harry spent the whole morning in the library, hoping that the dull atmosphere could calm his nerves. He had thought of warning Draco, but the Slytherin was in the Great Hall and Harry knew better than to stay in the same place as Dumbledore when it was likely for his Dark Mark to start burning at any time.

Harry didn't need to wait long before his prediction was proven correct. A sharp pain erupted from his left forearm without warning shortly before noon. Sighing in grim resignation, he pushed himself up from his chair and hurried out of the library.

A soft and sad cry brought Albus out from his musing. Both Severus and Draco had just been summoned. It was the first time in two months that Voldemort had called a full Death Eater meeting and Albus dreaded to know what the Dark Lord had planned.

"Have you felt it too, Fawkes?" he whispered, stroking the phoenix gently. "I fear something horrible is going to happen today."

Fawkes' presence renewed Albus' strength, but he could also feel the phoenix's anguish clearly, as if Fawkes was mourning for whatever was going to happen.

Just then the entrance of a glowing white leopard caused Albus to turn away form Fawkes. What he had been waiting for had finally arrived.

He reached out to touch Severus' Patronus and immediately the familiar voiced rang through his mind. Severus' voice was urgent and

the message was short, consisting of only two words, but that was enough to cause Albus to freeze in disbelief.

Diagon Alley.

Such a bold move! Perhaps Albus should have expected it. Tom had never been subtle about showing his power and Albus knew Voldemort's force had grown at an alarming rate in the past two months. It seemed the situation was indeed as grave as he had feared.

Leaving the leopard to fade into mist, Albus immediately conjured his own patronus to alert the Order. Then he used the floo network to contact several trusted members of his staff and entrusted the safety of the students to them. Without pausing and waiting for Minerva, who was hurrying towards his office upon hearing the news, Albus tossed a handful of floo-powder into the fireplace and headed for the Order's headquarters. There was no time to lose.

A/N: More of a transitional chapter that fills in the time gap between the raid last time and one of the most important events in this story.

Thanks for all of you who are still following this. I'll try to get the next one up as soon as possible.

Chapter 20: The Beginning of the War

"Avada Kedavra." Voldemort stood emotionlessly as the old wizard who dared to raise his wand at him dropped dead on the ground. The screams of panic around him intensified. Wizards and witches alike raced away from him, only to be trapped as an army of inferi advanced from the other side of the alley.

Voldemort had no intentions of killing them all, but he wouldn't tolerate anyone who dared to stand in his way, nor would he restrain his servants from causing any kind of mayhem. Death caused fear, and with fear, it would not be long before the most strong-willed ones bow down before him.

Power. In the end, it was all that mattered.

His attack had caught the wizarding world completely by surprise; no one had expected him to attack Diagon Alley. It was the ultimate display of power, with one of the most important places in Wizarding Britain as its stage.

A red beam hit the ground several feet behind him. Angered at the boldness of the attack, he turned around sharply, just in time to see the second curse shot towards the Death Eater standing right behind him. The Death Eater dodged at the last second and swiftly pointed his wand at his attacker.

"Expelliarmus!"

The wizard's wand flew out from his hand onto ground and he recoiled under the wand point of the Death Eater.

"Kill him," Voldemort commanded when the Death Eater made no move to eliminate the wizard currently under his mercy.

The Death Eater stiffed, but otherwise gave no indication of hearing his command. Voldemort narrowed his eyes.

/Potter,/ he hissed threateningly in parseltongue.

The wizard and Wormtail, who was standing behind him, flinched at the sound of the serpent language. Potter kept his wand trained on the wizard but was still unable to utter the curse. Voldemort was starting to get impatient at the boy's hesitation when he felt a strong sense of self-loathing coming from Potter.

"Avada Kedavra."

Potter shut his eyes as a flash of green beam hit the wizard in the chest. He lowered his wand, his hand trembling slightly. Voldemort spared the dead corpus a glance before forcing himself to continue advancing; he had wasted enough time as it was.

He strode along the alley, killing only when someone tried to actively attack him or block his way. It was strangely satisfying to see Potter was still staying close behind him. The hood and the white mask had concealed Potter's face, but that did little to hide the boy's feeling, and it was distracting him.

He had known and, though reluctant, had accepted the fact that Potter's presence would only serve to distract him, but it still hadn't stopped him from summoning Potter to this raid and commanding the boy to kill. Those decisions had come almost naturally. He wanted something. Not to see the boy suffer, but rather, he wanted some… confirmation.

A sudden change of the magic around him alerted Voldemort that the anti-apparition ward of Diagon Alley had been activated, telling him that the Aurors and Dumbledore's men had arrived. In an attempt to capture his followers, those idiots were arrogant, or brainless, enough to close off one of the most direct escape routes, caging themselves and those they were so determined to 'save' with his best armies.

He raised his wand as the first team of Aurors approached. The raid had finally begun. Let the whole world witness the return of Lord Voldemort and see for themselves how weak those who claimed to have the power to protect them actually were.

"Expecto Patronum!" Remus gritted his teeth as the seemingly endless lines of enemies advanced. The Ministry had sent out as many men as they could, but few had experienced a crisis like this, even fewer had experience against Dark Creatures like the inferi, dementors and-

"Traitor!" Only his enhanced senses allowed him to avert Greyback's assault from behind.

Acting purely on instinct, Remus spun around as Greyback greedily lunged at him with an inhuman speed. He grabbed Remus' wrists and soon the duel turned into a physical fight between the two werewolves.

It was obvious that Remus was losing. In terms of physical strength, he was of no match for Greyback. But all the Aurors and order members who had accompanied him were engaged in a fight of their own. Remus knew he had to hold on, or-

He was knocked backwards as a black blur lunged at Greyback from the side. The enraged werewolf howled as he tried to shove aside his attacker – a great black dog.

Remus paled. He forced himself to focus on the fight instead of the person who was supposed to be staying at home.

With the combined efforts of the two of them, they managed to push Greyback back, but they were unable to keep the werewolf from escaping.

Remus stared down at the dog barking victoriously beside him. What was Sirius thinking? There were aurors everywhere! Hadn't he promised to stay at the Headquarters?

"You are not supposed to be here, Padfoot," he hissed.

The dog looked up at him with a determined look that Remus knew all too well. Sirius was not about to be left behind.

Remus couldn't say he didn't understand Sirius' feeling. He knew his friend longed to get out of hiding. Knowing it was too late to send Sirius back at this point, Remus shook his head and returned to the battle, now with a barking black dog running alongside him. As long as Sirius stayed in his animagus form, Remus wouldn't mind another helping hand. It didn't take an expert to know that they were losing.

Harry flattened himself on the ground as a curse flew pass him, missing his head by an inch. Panting, Harry pushed himself up from the ground and prepared to defend himself against the fully-trained auror that seemed determined to bring him down.

Harry flinched at the look of hatred and disgust on the auror's face. The auror was young- he couldn't be more than thirty- but he was fast. While it was said that the aurors were not as strong as they used to be when Voldemort first rose to power, Harry knew better than to underestimate his opponent. Even with Harry's experience with dueling, he knew his odds were slim against any auror, who had had specialized training for years.

"Stupefy!" yelled Harry. "Impedimenta!"

The auror deflected the first spell and dodged the second one with relative ease. Harry knew he had to change strategy; he couldn't win. Scanning his surroundings with a quick glance, Harry realized that he was currently standing in front of the Quidditch supply store. With a plan forming in his mind, Harry edged closer to the display window, clenching his wand tightly. The auror sneered and sent another two curses towards him. Harry waited until the last second before couching down, letting the two curses to fly pass his head and shatter the window directly behind him.

Jumping away from scattering glass, Harry raised his wand and sent the two display brooms towards the auror before he had time to recover. The few seconds of distraction were enough for Harry to end the duel with a stunner.

Harry pushed himself up and searched for his… companions. Wormtail was nowhere to be seen; he had probably run away like the rat he was when Harry was assaulted by the auror. Voldemort was a short way ahead of him, dueling with five aurors at the same time before Flourish & Blott's.

Harry took a moment to note the damage around him. The shops were long abandoned by their owners, only a few were brave enough to stay and defend their properties. That was not a wise decision. Locked doors and windows served little purpose against the Dark Lord's minions and the dementors roamed every corner of Diagon Alley like a cloud of dark mist. Diagon Alley had been one of his favorite places ever since he first entered the wizarding world, seeing it in such a state made everything seem… unreal, like it was all a nightmare.

Had he not joined Voldemort then, would this have happened? He glanced at the corpses on the ground. Had he chosen to play his role as The-Boy-Who-Lived, would they have lived?

One of the aurors was hit by Voldemort's killing curse; the impact of the curse sent his body a few yards backward. Closing his eyes briefly, Harry raced over to where the Dark Lord was and pointed his wand at the nearest auror.

There was no turning back now.

"Impedimenta!" he yelled.

The auror dodged the attack a moment too late, having been focusing on the Dark Lord. Harry's curse managed to hit the auror's side, sending the auror backwards.

Taking the chance, Harry raised his wand. "Stupefy!"

The auror rolled away from the curse and stood back up with a speed relatively slower than the auror Harry had dueled earlier. Harry looked up to see his opponent for the first time, and froze.

"Tonks."

His whisper had gone unheard with all the noises around him. The witch was so unlike the one Harry had gotten familiar with during holidays. Any hints of clumsiness and immaturity were gone. Tonks moved with confidence; her eyes shinning with determination.

Harry relied on his seeker reflexes to dodge the next few curses from Tonks, his mind was still in shock with the identity of his opponent.

He should have expected it, of course, but he hadn't really considered the possibility of facing someone he knew in a direct duel.

Tonks knew a great deal of spells and curses, but she lacked the speed to be a good dueler. Her being a Metamorphmagus also gave little help in an actual duel.

Still, now without the element of surprise, Harry only managed to barely keep up with her. They exchanged curses for a short while until a horrible scream reached their ears

Instinctively, Tonks turned towards her fallen comrade; and that was a horrible mistake. She narrowly moved away from Harry's next curse, but was unable to recover fast enough to dodge the disarming spell following it.

Tonks was sent onto the ground as her wand flew out from her hand. Harry grabbed the wand and pointed his own at her. The anti-apparition ward was in place; there was no escape.

For the second time that day, Harry found someone under his mercy. He approached Tonks slowly, struggling to keep his wand steady. Tonks looked up at him from the ground. Her face was blank, but her eyes betrayed her fear.

Harry averted his eyes. There was no way he would do what he had done to that wizard earlier.

"Stupefy," he whispered.

Shaken, Harry turned away from Tonks' limp body just in time to see Voldemort kill off the last auror. Harry didn't know what had caused that horrible scream earlier, and he didn't think he wanted to either. He nearly threw up at the scene before him. There was blood everywhere. None of the three aurors looked like they had had a quick death.

As if sensing his gaze, Voldemort looked up from the three deformed bodies on the ground. He took in the state Harry was in, then he glanced at the unconscious form of Tonks. Narrowing his eyes, he walked towards Tonks, wand outstretched.

Knowing what the Dark Lord had in mind, Harry stood protectively before Tonks, holding his breath as Voldemort approached.

"Move aside, Potter," said Voldemort in a dangerous voice.

"She's already unconscious. She poses no threat to you anymore," protested Harry.

"Someone who's working for both the Ministry and Dumbledore cannot be allowed to live."

"And why is that?" Harry retorted, fully aware that he had overstepped his bound… again. "What good does it do to you by killing off everyone? Her power can hardly threaten you and you know that." He held out Tonks wand and snapped it in half. "There, she's wandless, defenseless. Can't you show just a little mercy?"

Voldemort pointed his wand between Harry's eyes, his eyes flashing dangerously. "You will do well not to rely on your luck too much, Potter. Just because you survived last time doesn't mean you can question me."

Harry swallowed but refused to avert Voldemort's gaze. "Can't you?" he asked softly, referring to his earlier question.

A flash of something crossed Voldemort's eyes, but the rage in him leapt to replace that foreign emotion before Harry could identity it. The Dark Lord tightened his grip on his wand and brought it closer to

Harry. Pain started to erupt from Harry's scar in response to the rage Voldemort was directing towards him.

Harry held his ground. "Please, spare her."

"Enough, Potter!" hissed Voldemort. "You should know by now I don't tolerate disobedience."

Harry knew he might have pushed Voldemort too far. Making sure he was still staying between the Dark Lord and Tonks, Harry slowly dropped to his knees and bowed his head, as he was expected to do.

"I am sorry, my Lord," he said quietly. "I shouldn't have questioned you."

Voldemort stared down at him. Harry fixed his eyes on the ground, holding his breath and bracing himself for whatever curse the Dark Lord might use.

Moments dragged by before Voldemort lowered his wand. He turned around and started to walk away.

Harry looked up in surprise. He glanced at Tonks, who was still unconscious but was certainly still alive. He couldn't help the small smile, nor the feeling of gratitude that seemed to be a mock to the destruction all around him.

Voldemort stopped in his tracks briefly and glanced back. "Come."

Taking in a deep breath, Harry pushed himself up and took his place behind Voldemort again with renewed determination.

Albus surveyed what had become of Diagon Alley. His eyes were cold without a hint of the usual twinkles as he took in the terror Voldemort had caused. He had known for a year that this would eventually happen, but it turned out to be much worse than he had ever imagined. The implication of this massive raid was clear on everyone – The second wizarding war had begun.

Battles were occurring everywhere in the Alley. While Albus had helped to turn the tide to their favor in several of these battles, he still could do nothing as aurors and innocents continued to fall before his eyes.

He could recognize some familiar faces among the dead, but he knew it was not the time for mourning. He raced through the Alley, battling the Dark Lord's minions in a way he had not done for many years.

Seeing a team of aurors battling a short way down the street, Albus caught up with them and pulled the leader of the team aside after helping them to banish a crowd of inferi.

"Drop that apparition ward now, Andrew," he ordered the auror, who he recognized as one of his former students. "You are trapping the survivors here."

Andrew frowned. "That's the standard procedure of a large-scaled combat, sir."

Albus sighed. "I am aware of that," he said. "But the public are caught unaware this time, few of them have prepared an emergency portkey and you are blocking off their means of escape."

"But-"

"Andrew, saving lives always comes first," Albus stared straight into the young man's eyes and spoke slowly. "We are in a delicate situation, as I'm sure you are aware."

What Albus hadn't said out loud, was that the situation had gone out of control. The aurors, with the addition of those from the Order, were having a hard time holding Voldemort's force back. It was not the time to be concerned about capturing those that were responsible; their first priority should be to get the innocents to safety.

From Andrew's grim expression, he too seemed to understand the grave situation they were in. They, including Albus, had made the

same mistake as they had when Voldemort first rose to power twenty years ago – they had all underestimated the ambition and power of Lord Voldemort.

"I will contact the ward team as soon as I can," said Andrew quietly. "Good luck, sir." He nodded to Albus before running back to join his comrades.

"And you," said Albus softly before continuing down the road, heading towards the central part of Diagon Alley.

Remus gritted his teeth as he sent spell after spell towards his opponent, sweat dripping from his forehead despite the cold weather. Even with the mask and hood, Remus knew from the unmistakable blonde hair and the unique scent that the Death Eater he was currently dueling was none other than Lucius Malfoy, the man who had used every chance he got to display his disgust towards the 'tainted' blood. But as arrogant as the elder Malfoy was, he was no doubt a good dueler.

Remus jumped aside from the coming curse and advanced. He was not an auror, but his knowledge in Defense and his enhanced senses gave him advantages in battles that even aurors didn't have.

Two aurors were fighting their own battles behind him, aided by Padfoot, something that was worrying Remus to no end. He couldn't shake off the feeling that something was bound to happen with Sirius being so close to the aurors.

Remus could feel that Malfoy was slowing down; the power behind his curses was gradually decreasing as well. Feeling it was his chance to end of the duel, Remus pushed Malfoy harder than before, trying to find an opening in his defense.

From behind him, Remus could hear the characteristic laugh of a woman who could only be Bellatrix Lestrange. He could hear her sadistic cooing voice, followed by a child's scream that nearly distracted him from his own duel.

From the corner of his eyes, he could see Bellatrix waving her wand mockingly before a small child. The two aurors and Remus himself were all too busy to do anything, except-

Panic struck Remus as he heard the familiar bark of Padfoot. Too late. The large black dog transformed just before he reached the child. Sirius pushed the child out of the way of Bellatrix's killing curse then turned around to face the Death Eater.

"Ah, my dear cousin," Bellatrix exclaimed in a mock delight.

Remus was forced to focus back on his own duel as Malfoy sent two successive curses at him. He barely managed to dodge the curses. Before he could send off any counter spells, a startled gasp from behind him stopped him in his track.

"Black!" an auror yelled in alarm.

Remus swore. "He's on our side!" he shouted out as loud as he could, not daring to turn his back on Malfoy, who had apparently caught on Remus' distracted state and was starting to gain on him.

Focusing back on his duel, Remus was dimly aware that Sirius had engaged in a duel with Bellatrix. He wasn't sure if his earlier claim that Sirius was on their side had any effect on his auror companions, but at least there didn't seem to be any curses flying at Sirius other than that from Bellatrix.

Determined to end this seemingly endless duel with Lucius Malfoy, Remus increased the intensity of his attack, using every advantages that being a werewolf had granted him. Malfoy was slowly pushed back and soon Remus saw his chance. Malfoy had paused a second too long after sending off a killing curse. Remus dodged the curse easily and raised his wand.

"Stupefy!"

Malfoy tried to conjure a shield, but Remus' curse was faster. It hit Malfoy near his heart, stunning him instantly.

Remus allowed himself a small victorious smile. He hadn't thought that beating Lucius Malfoy would bring him such a great satisfaction.

Turning away from Malfoy's fallen body, Remus was about to check on his other companions when every senses in him screamed danger. Before he had time to react, something hard hit the back of his head. He fell onto the ground and his vision blurred. The last thing he remembered before darkness claimed him was a woman's voice.

"Ah, Severus. How nice of you to join us."

Harry crouched down to avoid the curse that was aimed at his head only to find another curse flying towards him. Rolling out of the way, Harry sent off a counter curse and pushed himself upright hastily. There were curses flying everywhere and it was hard to determine which curse was from which side.

He and Voldemort had encountered a group of about ten aurors battling with a smaller group of Death Eaters. If the Death Eaters were losing before, the situation had certainly changed the moment the Dark Lord had entered the fight.

It was a rare sight in the raid. Harry had never encountered more than five or six aurors fighting as a team together. Harry wasn't sure if it was because they didn't have enough time to organize and formulate strategy, or because they were simply lacked in number.

Harry couldn't spot Voldemort anywhere near him, but he was aware of the several Death Eaters fighting alongside him. He couldn't recognize any of them behind the mask, but he knew for a fact that he couldn't have held on this long against the aurors without them. It seemed that his life after meeting Tom Riddle in the past was never short of irony.

Those ten aurors seemed to be some of the best the Ministry could offer and all refused to be beaten so easily, even if it had become clear that the tide was not in their favor.

From where he was standing, Harry could see a lone Death Eater fighting an auror away from the main group, and it was clear that the Death Eater wouldn't be able to hold on much longer.

Harry hesitated. Should he help? But that was Death Eater.

And so was he. Whatever his intention had been, he was a part of them, and it was his responsibility to help.

The Death Eater seemed startled when Harry ran over to his aid, but continued to fight on after a moment's pause. It was a tough fight, and Harry could see that the Death Eater was not an experienced dueler at all, probably one of Voldemort's newest recruits. But luck were on their side, the auror was exhausted from his previous fight and outnumbered. In the end, Harry managed to hit him with a stunner when the auror was distracted momentarily by the other Death Eater's attack.

There was no time to rest though. Before he could recover from the exhausting duel, Harry suddenly found himself being thrown backwards by a powerful surge of magic. He narrowly avoided hitting his head on the nearby wall and landed heavily on the ground. The Death Eater that had just fought with him had taken the attack in full force and was knocked unconscious. Gritting his teeth, Harry quickly pushed himself to his feet. He pointed his wand at his attacker and froze as he caught sight of the pair of cold blue eyes staring straight at him.

Dumbledore.

A/N: The first part of the raid in Diagon Alley. For those who want to see the big revelation scene, you'll get it soon. And in case you want to ask, Remus is still alive… for now at least.

Chapter 21: Falling into Place

He couldn't win. It didn't even take a moment for Harry to realize why Dumbledore was considered one of the most powerful wizards alive. He could practically feel the man's power. From Harry's memories, Dumbledore's presence had always been reassuring, even when he was 'Alex.' But now, all he could feel from Dumbledore was a kind of cold, collected anger.

Looking into Dumbledore's eyes, Harry flinched. He had seen that gaze before, in his fourth year, and he remembered himself thinking at that time that he would never want to be on the receiving end of Dumbledore's wrath. Under the cold gaze, Harry felt a strange emotion stirring inside him and he froze as he realized what that was. Shame. For some reason, Dumbledore's gaze made him feel ashamed of what he had done.

Dumbledore stared at him with a grim expression. Shaking his head, he raised his wand.

Taking in a shaky breath, Harry shifted to attack stance. His mind was screaming at the absurdity of the situation. What was he thinking? Trying to duel Dumbledore?

No. He wouldn't last a second. He needed to escape.

"Reducto!" he yelled, firing his spell at the wall beside Dumbledore.

The wall shattered, but it didn't slow Dumbledore down as Harry had wanted. Dumbledore calmly took a step away from the collapsing wall and waved his wand in a sharp arc.

Harry swore as the fallen bricks changed direction and flew towards him. Instinct kicked in and he dove sideway. Something hard smashed into his leg and he dropped heavily on the ground. He let out a short cry as the impact sent a wave of pain from his left leg, which seemed to have been broken. Blinking against the dizziness, he looked up, only to find Dumbledore once again pointing his wand at him. He tried to push himself to his feet, but his body refused to

move. Unwilling to give up just like that, Harry gritted his teeth and lifted his wand just as Dumbledore was about to deal the final blow.

Then everything stopped. The curse never came. Even from the distance, Harry could see the look of disbelief in Dumbeldore's eyes. He was staring at Harry's wand, looking more shocked than Harry had ever seen before.

Dumbledore had recognized his wand.

Slowly, Dumbledore lifted his gaze and actually looked at Harry for the first time since the duel. The mask that marked him as a Death Eater covered his face almost completely, except his eyes. His eyes… his mother's eyes. Harry knew that was the only confirmation Dumbledore needed.

Harry would never forget the look of shock and disappointment in Dumbledore's eyes at that moment. It hurt, much more than he had expected. It didn't matter how much Dumbledore had hid from him; how much he himself had changed, the fact remained that he cared how Dumbledore thought of him. It hurt to know he had disappointed the man, in the worst way possible.

Harry was unable to react when Dumbeldore raised his wand and disarmed him. He averted his gaze as the old wizard walked towards him slowly. Harry stiffened when he felt a pair of hands gently pull him up from the ground, guiding him to sit beside the low wall of the alley.

Dumbledore stood before him. His apparent calmness did nothing to ease the situation. The twinkles in his eyes were long gone, not even the previous coldness was there anymore.

Slowly, Dumbledore reached down. Harry closed his eyes as he felt his mask being removed. He looked up just in time to see the look of pain cross Dumbledore's eyes.

"Is there a reason why you did this, Harry?" asked Dumbledore, looking older than ever before.

Harry lowered his head. He didn't have the answer Dumbledore wanted. Nothing could justify his actions, no matter what his intention had been. Dumbledore had always been able to help him whenever he had gotten himself into trouble, but not this time.

"No one forced me to, sir, I took the mark willingly," he answered softly.

Dumbledore sighed, his shoulders slumping slightly. "Then why, my boy? You know very well what he has done."

Harry closed his eyes. How could he tell Dumbledore an answer even he himself wasn't sure of?

Albus waved his wand subtly, sending Harry into a deep sleep as he felt the change of magic in the area. The apparition ward was down. The noise of battle was slowly fading. The raid was nearly over, and their side had lost, terribly.

He looked down at the white mask in his hand, then back at Harry, who had remained silent after saying that no one had forced him to join Voldemort. A sense of terrible loss rushed over him. What had gone wrong? Why hadn't he noticed anything?

Was it because of the time travel? He had not been able to confirm what Harry's friends had told him, but if it was the case…

Had something happened in the past that turned Harry to the road that Tom Riddle had once chosen? Harry's friends had told him that Harry had been using his alternate identity, the one he had used in the past, secretly for several months by now. Was this what Harry had been doing?

Albus was sure of one thing though. He couldn't let the Ministry have Harry, or let the public know of this, or everything would be lost. He would bring Harry back to the Headquarters. He would tell the boy about the prophecy and help him find his way back. He hoped it was not already too late.

He was about to retrieve Harry's wand when a jet of green shot out from nowhere, lightened up the dark alley. Albus moved sideways swiftly. The killing curse traveled past him and hit the ground.

Keeping himself close to Harry, Albus looked up calmly to face the figure approaching him. Despite the distorted appearance, there was no mistaking his identity. It had been fifteen years since Albus had last seen him.

Voldemort stopped several feet away from him. His crimson eyes flickered to Harry's unconscious form near the wall before fixing on Albus.

"I see you are quick to abandon your protégé, Dumbledore," said Voldemort, his voice lacked the mirth that Albus was expecting. Instead, Voldemort's eyes were narrowed in unmasked anger, which seemed unfounded, considering the total victory he had had today. "I'm surprised at how clueless you have been. Potter has been serving me for months and only now did you figure it out."

Albus met Voldemort's gaze steadily. "Harry would not have joined you willingly, Tom, as we both know. You've taken too much from him."

For some reason, this seemed to have affected Voldemort. The anger in his gaze subsided for a brief second before coming back in full force, concealing whatever emotions Albus' words had invoked.

"Believe what you want, Dumbledore," said Voldemort. "This war has spun out of your control. You've lost."

"Lost? I don't believe so," replied Albus with a slight smile. "There's a type of power that is stronger than any magic, and this power is enough to turn the tide in even the worst situation." He glanced at Harry. "You can never control him, Tom, no matter what you do. Harry is protected from your manipulation by the same power that has protected him from your curse fifteen years ago."

Something about the dark and twisted kind of amusement that flashed across Voldemort's eyes sent chills down Albus' spine. Voldemort raised his wand. "It is a shame you will never live to see the irony of your claim, Dumbledore."

And the duel began. It was a duel based purely on instinct and raw power. Voldemort put great power in his deadly curses, intending to finish what he had never been able to – to surpass Albus in a duel.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Albus dodged the curse and went on the offensive. He needed to push Voldemort backward. They were dueling too close to where Harry was for Albus' comfort. Voldemort was firing curses mercilessly, hardly seemed to notice, or care, that one of his deadly curses could have killed Harry.

Albus pushed forward, sending off a spell that surrounded Voldemort with flames. The Dark Lord countered the spell with ease.

"Fool. You believe such spells can kill me?" Voldemort hissed.

"There are things much worse than death, Tom," said Albus quietly.

Voldemort snarled and renewed his attack, pouring even more power into his curses. Albus managed to keep up with the Dark Lord's speed, shielding off spells and transfiguring nearby objects to aid him.

The power Voldemort was displaying worried Albus. The resurrection process didn't seem to have diminished Voldemort's power one bit, quite the contrary. The ancient ritual had made Voldemort into a deadly enemy. Though the Dark Lord was still far from invincible, Albus knew, in terms of sheer strength, he could no longer match the resurrected Voldemort.

Albus sidestepped a killing curse, only to find another one coming his way. Reacting swiftly, he raised his wand and conjured a metal shield out of thin air, effectively blocking the curse that could penetrate any defensive spell.

Voldemort seemed enraged by this. "Avada Kedavra!"

The spell was fast, hitting heavily on Albus' shield. The metal shied broke under the power of the spell, but not before deflecting it off course. The green beam shot past Albus, right towards-

No caring about turning his back on his opponent, Albus spun around, wand in his hand. Too late. He felt his blood freeze as the killing curse sped towards where Harry was.

"Harry!" he shouted, truly frightened.

At the last possible second, a bright red flame appeared before Harry. Fawkes shielded the boy, swallowing the curse in a whole. The phoenix burst into flames, leaving behind a pile of ashes, from which Fawkes would be reborn again.

Albus shut his eyes briefly, relieved that Fawkes had saved Harry life when he had failed to. Turning back, he saw Voldemort was as stunned as he was.

Albus couldn't pinpoint what, but something had happened during the last few seconds, when Voldemort's curse had come very close to killing Harry. In Voldemort's eyes, Albus could detect something totally unexpected – fear.

For a long time, Albus had believed that Voldemort's greatest fear, and probably his only fear, was his own death. He had believed that Voldemort was incapable of caring for someone other than himself. But now Albus realized that was not true. Voldemort had clearly been afraid of Harry's death.

But why? Considering the history between Harry and Voldemort, that made little sense. Voldemort was not the person that would accept those who had wronged him before. And Albus knew for a fact that Voldemort never cared for anyone but himself and–

The pieces slowly fell into place. Severus' report about the new Death Eater. Voldemort's protectiveness over Harry. Harry's traveling to the past, losing his memories...

"Alex," he whispered.

Voldemort turned to him sharply at the mention of the name, confirming Albus' suspicion.

"Harry is Alex," said Albus slowly, his eyes never leaving the Dark Lord.

Voldemort snarled. He raised his left hand and said something that was lost to Albus. Then he pointed his wand at the sky. "Morsmordre."

A glowing Dark Mark formed in the sky. At the same time, a black mist appeared around Albus, blocking his view. He could feel the chilling coldness filling the area as a group of Dementors surrounded him.

"Expecto Patronum!"

Focusing his power, Albus banished the dark creatures with one single spell. But he was still too slow– Voldemort had disapparated, along with Harry.

He stared at the empty spot where Harry had been. Everything matched. There was no mistake. Harry Potter was Alex Salutor. Even though there were still things he didn't understand, he knew there was no doubt that Harry had traveled fifty years into the past, assumed another identity and befriended Tom Riddle.

What did that mean? For the first time since Voldemort's first raise, Albus felt that the outcome of this war was no longer in his hands.

Peering out from a narrow side-alley, a figure took in the whole scene from under an invisibility cloak.

Dumbledore had finally found out. What would happen then? He would not be surprised if Dumbledore decided to hide his discovery

from the Ministry; he knew better than most that it would not be the first time. Either way, Voldemort had taken Harry away. In a sense, the Dark Lord had saved Harry… again.

The figure leaned back on the wall and looked up the Dark Mark hanging in the sky. He took in a deep breath. Voldemort's army was finally leaving.

Following the Dark Lord was not easy. While the invisibility cloak could hide him from most Death Eaters, the Dementors could still sense him and Voldemort himself could see through the cloak. He was relieved that it was finally over.

He admitted that he had been curious. He had been compelled to find out more about the whole messed up situation. That was why he had volunteered for the job when the Order wanted someone to follow Voldemort in battle in case the Dark Lord made any sudden moves. His volunteering had surprised many, maybe even himself. But aside from witnessing some of the most disturbing scenes he had encountered in his life, he had found out much indeed.

He had seen with his own eyes what had transpired between Harry and Voldemort during the whole battle. And once again, he had witnessed the strange bond that seemed to exist between Harry and the Dark Lord.

While he still found the idea of… redeeming Voldemort unbelievable, it was clear that Voldemort's actions had been hindered by Harry's presence. Harry had actually managed to convince Voldemort to spare a life.

The figure sighed. Now he had to decide what to do next. Should he tell Dumbledore what he knew? How much had the man already figured out?

He took off the invisibility cloak, feeling suddenly naked without its protection. Shaking away the strange feeling, he disapparated from the alley. He had been absent for long enough, it was time for him to head back to the Ministry.

"You traitor! What have you done to Remus?"

Severus wished to blast that idiotic mutt with the nastiest curse he knew of. Couldn't Black see the two Death Eaters following him? Lupin had chosen the precise moment Severus had arrived to knock down Lucius and Severus had to act quickly before any of his 'comrades' had had the chance to send off a killing curse at the unsuspecting werewolf. Severus had actually saved the man's life by merely hitting him unconscious, and here Black was, cursing him for betraying their side.

The Aurors in that area were all engaging in their own battles with other Death Eaters, so it was Black alone versus both Severus and Bellatrix in a duel.

With Bellatrix around, Severus had to keep up with his disguise and couldn't simply let Black escape. He had deliberately created a few openings for Black to run, but that idiot had kept on attacking.

Severus cursed inwardly. Idiotic Gryffindor. It was not the time to play brave. Couldn't Black see he doesn't stand a chance?

It wasn't long before one of Bellatrix's curses hit Black.

"Crucio!"

Black dropped to one knee, his face contorting as he struggled not to scream.

"I expected more of a challenge from you, dear cousin," taunted Bellatrix.

The darker part of Severus looked on with interest, wondering how long it would last before Black lost control. This pain was what Severus had to endure all the time, when Black was safely hidden away…

Black's body soon started to tremble and he let out a cry of pain. Then he clenched his jaw stubbornly, refusing give in to the pain.

But Seveus knew better. No one could endure the cruciatus curse for over a minute without collapsing, unless the person had been subjected to the curse so often that he had gotten used of it, like Severus.

Black's control slowly slipped away. Soon, he started to scream, collapsing onto the ground and twisting in pain as Bellatrix looked on in obvious pleasure.

A minute later, Bellatrix finally released the curse. Black was in a pathetic shape, lying on a pool of his own blood and trembling on the ground.

Bellatrix smirked in triumph. "Your turn, Severus," she said. "Don't make it too long, though. Our Lord is waiting." She gestured at the Dark Mark that had appeared on the sky several minutes ago.

Severus kept his face completely blank as he looked down at Black, who was now glaring at him with utmost hatred in his blood-shot eyes. He raised his wand slowly, his mind racing to think of any possible way to get the mutt out.

Taking on Bellatrix was out of question. Even though Severus believed he could best that witch in a duel, he knew it was suicidal to do so in front of four other Death Eaters.

Letting Black escape was not an option then. The only way left would be to convince Bellatrix that they should let Black live… It would not be easy, and if he failed, Black would have to die.

"You know, Severus," came Bellatrix 's voice from behind him, "I remember hearing an interesting rumor about a traitor among us." She walked up next to him with a twisted smile on her face. "Is that why you hesitate? Because he is one of Dumbledore's dog like you?"

"Of course not," Severus snapped. "I was merely considering sending him to the aurors over giving him a quick death. Dumbledore never bothered to clear his name."

Severus ignored the look Black was sending him.

Bellatrix shook her head. "Azkaban has lost its use without the Dementors," she said. "Killing him here would prove to be quite an entertainment, don't you think, Severus?"

Severus looked down at Black. "Of course," he said quietly, his voice devoid of any emotions.

"Our Lord is waiting. You don't want him to hear of why we are late, do you?" said Bellatrix , seemingly enjoying this conversation.

Severus knew what he had to do. Bellatrix would pay for pushing him like this later, but for now, his own survival came first. He pointed his wand between Black's eyes and called upon all the hatred he had felt for the man.

"Avada Kedavra."

Chapter 22: Traitors

St. Mungo's had not seen such disaster for more than fifteen years. Victims from Diagon Alley poured in by floo and portkey. Healers dashed around the place, shouting instructions at each other and running from room to room with trays of potions.

Bill Weasley leaned back against the wall of the medical ward where most Order members were kept. Next to him was Charlie, lying on a hospital bed with his mother fussing over him.

"Relax, Mum, there's nothing to worry about," said Charlie, his voice was still too weak for Bill's liking.

"Relax? Dear, you could have been… have been-"

"I'm used to dealing with dragons, Mum. Greyback alone is not enough to take me down."

"You know I don't want you to do that job, it's too dangerous. Look at what happened just now-"

Bill sighed, tuning out what was guaranteed to be a long argument. Given what had happened to his father, Bill couldn't really blame his mother for her over-protectiveness.

It had been a close call. Charlie had been assaulted by Greyback, the mad werewolf. His brother managed to fight off Greyback, but not before the werewolf had broken several of his ribs. Bill hated to think what would have happened if Charlie had not been trained specifically in handling dangerous creatures like dragons.

He surveyed the room. The sight here was not a pleasant one. His memories of the first war against Voldemort were vague, but he did remember hearing stories of Voldemort and his minions. They were described as cold-blooded monsters that killed innocents without remorse and they were merciless to anyone who fell under their wands. Even for those who were fortunate enough to escape, it would usually take a long time before their wounds were completed healed, if ever.

Today, he realized those stories were not exaggerating at all. He shivered as he recalled the horror of battle just a little while ago. It was exactly like a nightmare.

A loud crash, followed by the sound of something breaking, rang through the medical ward, piercing through Bill's thoughts. He turned towards the noise to find Tonks standing near the doorway, apologizing to a disapproving healer.

Tonks was dressed in a hospital gown. She had obviously bumped into a bed-side table when she came in through the door and knocked over whatever had been on it.

Taking a glance at his mother and Charlie, Bill walked over to Tonks once the healer left.

Tonks looked up. "I said I'm sor- Oh, Bill, how are you?"

"I'm fine." Bill smiled weakly. "How are your injuries?"

Tonks eyed the gown she was wearing in disgust. "It's nothing," she said. "I kept telling them I was only stunned, but they won't discharge me until they have time to check me out properly."

"Stunned?"

"By a Death Eater," Tonks scowled. "I could have won, but I was… distracted. That bastard took the chance and disarmed me." She eyes flickered past Bill's shoulder and her face turned solemn. "But I guess I was just lucky to survive. It could have been worse."

Bill followed Tonks glance to find Remus was sitting alone near the corner of the room, his head resting on his hands. He sighed. That was true, not everyone had been as lucky as Tonks and his brother.

"I heard Peter Pettigrew is caught," said Bill quietly.

"Yes, he is. And he will pay for what he's done. Only-" Tonks shook her head. "It's so unfair. Sirius has waited for so long. Now that he's finally free, he..." She tailed off, unable to continue.

Bill lowered his head. He never knew Sirius Black well, but he knew what the man had sacrificed for his friends and could only imagine what it was like to spend twelve years in Azkaban for something he had not done. Sirius was close to his younger siblings though, and he was Harry's godfather. He hoped Dumbledore would be able to break the news to them gently. Sirius' death would hit them hard, as it had many Order members.

Tonks left him soon to talk to Remus as Bill watched on sadly. Remus had lost everything to You-Know-Who… just like so many others. And the war had only just begun.

From the way their side had been overpowered by Voldemort's force so easily today, Bill knew it was going to be a long war… or not. He hated to think about their chance of winning like this, but while he knew he would stay with the Order until the very end, he knew, as did everyone in this room, that unless they seriously reorganized their force, or something suddenly happened to change the tide, they could not stand much of a chance against Voldemort's future assaults.

"It was not luck that saved her."

Lost in his thoughts, Bill jumped at the voice.

"Percy?" Bill turned around to face his brother. So, his younger brother had finally returned from his meeting with those self-righteous Ministry officers.

Percy was watching Tonks with an odd expression. His eyes followed her as she sat down next to Remus and attempted to talk to him. Then he shook his head and turned to Bill. "How's Charlie?"

Bill motioned to Charlie's bed, "He's fine. Mum is talking to him right now."

Percy nodded and made his way to the bed. Bill frowned. Percy was pale and he looked troubled, which was understandable. Even now, he still found it hard to believe that Percy had volunteered to spy on the Dark Lord.

Bill could tell how hard his younger brother had worked for the Order ever since he had returned home for Christmas. But anyone who knew Percy would know that Percy would be far more comfortable aiding their side through diplomatic means than actually entering the battlefield. Bill shrugged slightly as he recalled how his mother had reacted to Percy's volunteering.

"Bill?"

At his mother's call, Bill quickly joined Percy at Charlie's bedside, wondering what his younger brother had meant earlier.

With a heavy heart and troubled thoughts, Albus walked through the corridor of Hogwarts, gladly taking in the comfort merely being in the school had brought him. It had taken him almost an hour to settle things with the Ministry and only now was he free to check on his students. He hoped nothing serious had happened to the school while he was away.

It was a tragic day indeed. The numbers of dead were great, from both sides of the war. Albus closed his eyes as he remembered the list of names of those who had been killed, some of them hit Albus harder than the others. It saddened him greatly to hear the death of one of his students. Theodore Nott had been killed by a stray killing curse during the confusion of the battle. It was the third time a student had died during Albus' life as a professor.

He whispered the password to the gargoyle and entered his office. The room was quiet, except for baby Fawkes' squeaks. Albus crossed the room, stopping briefly before the fireplace to call Minerva to him.

He sat down behind his desk and closed his eyes. The weight of the day's events finally crushed down on him, now that he had time to reflect on it. He felt so tired. Things were happening so fast. So much had occurred, so much had changed.

Images of an encounter he had no intention of sharing with anyone flashed before his eyes. He remembered the shock of seeing Harry in the battle, the disbelief of finding out he was one of Voldemort's Death Eaters, then the realization of who Harry had once been.

As far as Albus knew, no one had been able to get as close to Tom Riddle as Alex. That was why, even after so many years, Albus could still remember Alex clearly.

Albus remembered Alex as a quiet student. He had been around the top students in his class and, despite the special circumstances of his enrollment into Hogwarts, Alex had managed to keep a low profile at school. In short, Alex had been everything Harry was not.

But that was no excuse for why he hadn't been able to make the connection until today. Many things had apparently happened this year, but Albus had failed to notice anything wrong with Harry. Even now, he couldn't be sure of what exactly had transpired between Harry and Voldemort and what had driven Harry to make such a horrible decision. Had Voldemort used Alex's friendship with Tom Riddle to manipulate Harry into joining him?

That could not be the truth, Albus realized. Severus had once told him that Voldemort was not pleased with the presence of the newest Death Eater, who could only be Harry. Tom Riddle had cut off all his ties with his past when he first announced himself as Lord Voldemort. If anything, he would do all he could to deny his old friendship with Alex. He would never mention it, even if he could gain something from it.

In fact, Albus had long been convinced that there was nothing left of Tom Riddle's humanity inside Voldemort. But he was proven wrong again. He could not, and would not, deny the concern Voldemort had felt for Harry in the battle just now.

He reached into his robe pocket and took out what he had found on the ground after Voldemort had disapparated with Harry. He turned his smooth red stone in his hand, feeling the magic radiated from it. A magical stone.

Albus stared at the stone thoughtfully. He wondered…

An alert from his ward told Albus that Minerva had arrived. Carefully keeping his expressions neutral, he waved his wand to open the door. Minerva walked into his office, looking tensed and tired.

"Did anything happen while I was away, Minerva?" asked Albus once Minerva had seated herself.

"Owls have been flying in since about an hour ago, and the students are all discussing what has happened in Diagon Alley," Minerva sighed. "Some of them have families who live there."

Albus sighed. He understood how great an impact the attack would be to his students.

"Anything else?"

Minerva pursed her lips. "Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger just came to me. They said they have not seen Mr. Potter since this morning and they couldn't find him anywhere in the castle. I doubt Potter has actually left the school, but with Potter's history, maybe you should check the castle's wards, Albus."

Albus closed his eyes briefly. "That is not necessary, Minerva. Harry was in Diagon Alley."

"What-" Minerva's eyes widened. "How did he get out of the castle? What is he doing out there?"

"I believe that's Voldemort's doing," answered Albus slowly.

Minerva shivered at the Dark Lord's name. "Again?" she said, looking concerned. "Where is Potter now, Albus? Is he injured?"

Albus rubbed his temple. How could he tell Minerva that he was the person who had injured Harry?

"Albus?" Minerva frowned. She had known Albus long enough to know it was rare for him to display such weariness. "Is something wrong? Did something happen to Mr. Potter?"

"Voldemort has Harry, Minerva," said Albus. He thought back on his duel with the Dark Lord and added quietly, more to himself, "But I don't think Harry is in danger at the moment."

Minerva paled. "What do you mean? You-Know-Who has-"

"Harry is safe right now. I will explain when more of us are present," Albus cut her off firmly. "For now, we need to settle the students." He let out a long sigh. "I am afraid we have lost another student today."

A large crowd of Death Eaters had already assembled at the graveyard when Severus arrived with Bellatrix and Lucius. They walked up to the front row of the crowd, a position that indicated they were among their lord's most trusted. Most of the members of Voldemort's inner circle had arrived, save for Goyle and the newest member. Severus couldn't tell how many Death Eaters the Dark Lord had lost in the battle, apparently not much, judging from the size of the gathered crowd.

The raid was worse than he had expected. The Aurors were as pathetic as their rotten Ministry; they were completely overwhelmed by Voldemort's force. As for Severus himself, he had done all he could in his position to aid the Order, but some kills were inevitable for him to avert nearby Death Eaters' suspicion.

He didn't feel any trace of remorse for Black's death though. Black was a fool, and today he had proved himself to be just that. Albus would understand, though he would not be pleased, Black had been Potter's godfather after all. As for the rest of the Order, Severus could care less about what they thought of him.

After a few more minutes, Voldemort finally arrived. Severus ensured his Occlumency shield was secured and looked up to see what the Dark Lord had to say. It should not be a long meeting, seeing as Voldemort's side had acheived complete victory this time.

A look at the Dark Lord told Severus that it might not be the case. He immediately noticed that the rat Wormtail was absent, and that Voldemort was anything but pleased.

Apparently, Severus was not the only one who noticed that. The crowd around him had fallen deathly quiet, and the air was thick with uncertainty and nervousness.

"Report?" Voldemort addressed the front row of the crowd.

It was Lucius who stepped forward. He kissed the hem of Voldemort's robe and kneeled before him. After being defeated by Lupin, it was only natural for Lucius to try to win back the Dark Lord's favor.

"My Lord, our side has taken complete control of the raid. At least a hundred have been killed, including aurors and several members of Dumbledore's Order. Emmeline Vance is dead, along with Elphias Doge and Sirius Black."

"Black?" For some reason, Black's name had caught Voldemort's attention.

Knowing it was his turn, Severus stepped up and kneeled down. "Sirius Black died under my wand, my Lord."

It was then that Severus started to feel that something was wrong. Something about the gaze Voldemort was using to regard him made him tense in alertness.

"Ah, but it is a shame that Black would die for nothing, don't you think, Severus?"

Years of being a spy allowed Severus to remain clam. His heart was racing, though he managed to appear unaffected by the question.

"Black was a fool for following Dumbledore. He deserved to die," said Severus, his voice a little tighter than usual.

"I am glad you agree, Severus."

Severus froze at Voldemort's quiet words. He looked up slowly to see the Dark Lord turning away from him and addressing the crowd.

"My faithful Death Eaters. Today we have shown the world the power we wield. Our enemy was overwhelmed by our force. The war has begun, but it will not be long. Soon, the wizarding world will once again belong to those who are worthy of having it." Voldemort paused briefly. "But someone among us seems to have a different idea." His gaze swept over them all slowly. "There is a traitor among us."

Severus could hear mutterings coming from the Death Eaters behind him, accompanied by a wave of uneasiness. Then his worst fear was confirmed. Slowly, Voldemort raised his wand and pointed it straight at Severus.

Severus' survival sense kicked in. "My Lord-"

"Crucio."

Severus gritted his teeth against the pain, using his hands to prevent his body from collapsing.

The Dark Lord lifted the curse after a few minutes, leaving Severus to pant heavily. The graveyard was in total silence now. The eyes of every Death Eater were focused on Severus.

Voldemort stopped directly before him. "You have been useful, Severus," he said. "You've played your role well to draw out Dumbledore's Order. But your usefulness ends here."

Severus moved his hand slowly, attempting to reach for his wand. But the Dark Lord seemed to have anticipated his move. With a quick movement of his wand, Voldemort summoned Severus' wand, rendering him weaponless.

"Not so fast, Severus." Voldemort said with a hint of amusement. He turned away from him to address the crowd of Death Eaters again. "Watch closely, my servants, the consequences of disloyalty." He gestured to the members of his inner circle.

All Severus could hear before another wave of pain shot through him was a faint remark from the Dark Lord.

"And don't damage him permanently yet, I need him to be coherent enough to answer my questions."

The movement of something moist and cold against him awoke Harry. It took a few seconds before the cloudiness of his mind cleared away.

"What-"

The unfamiliar scene that greeted him snapped him into full awareness. He looked around frantically. The first thing he spotted was his wand, lying on a small table beside him. Where was he? This place was obviously not a cell, more like a bedroom. And the movement that had woken him earlier…

/Master Alex,/ came a familiar voice with a strange undertone of relief.

/Nagini?/ Harry pushed himself up from the bed he was lying on and turned to face the huge snake that had coiled up beside him. If Nagini was here…

Nagini extended her height to Harry's eye level, seemingly satisfied that he could move about without any trouble.

Harry flexed his leg, which had been broken in his duel with Dumbledore. It had been healed completely; he could not feel a single trace of pain as he moved it.

/Master healed it before he left,/ said Nagini, confirming Harry's guess. /Are you still in pain, Master Alex?/

/No,/ answered Harry with a small smile. /I'm fine, Nagini./ Harry looked around the unfamiliar surroundings. /Where are we?/ he asked.

/We're in Master's manor. /

Voldemort's lair. Harry remembered most parts of his short confrontation with Dumbledore, but what had happened after he had lost consciousness? How had he ended up in Voldemort's home?

He surveyed the room. It was a little larger than his bedroom at the Dursley's, but much more elegantly furnished. There was a bed at one side, a desk and several other furnishings. The tone of the room reminded Harry of the Slytherin common room. But what really struck him was that this room gave him the same feeling the Room of Requirement did. In another word, it reeked of dark magic.

'What now?' he found himself wondering. His mind was still recovering from the shock of facing Dumbledore in battle and couldn't fully register the implication of what had happened just now. Deep down, though, Harry knew he had no where else to go. Everything had changed now. Dumbledore had found out about him being a Death Eater. What would that make him then? An enemy? A fugitive?

All he knew for certain was that there was only one path left before him. And how that path was going to end rested solely in Voldemort's hands.

Voldemort watched from his throne as his inner circle took turns to have their 'fun.' His inner circle could be quite creative when it came to torture and he knew the fear it created would be enough to secure his other servants' loyalty, especially the newest recruits.

Severus was a fool to betray him, but to kill one of his allies in order to keep his façade? Perhaps he should have expected it from a Slytherin. Severus was an excellent spy indeed, it was a shame that he had chosen the wrong side to work for.

The raid had been a total success. As early as tonight, the whole wizarding world would hear of Dumbledore and their Ministry's defeat, and once again the world would be plunged into fear, making it even more vulnerable than it was now. It would not be long before he could gain power over them all. Finally, he would get what he had always wanted. Yet, it didn't bring him as much satisfaction as he had expected. Somehow, today's battle didn't feel like a victory at all.

"Crucio!"

Draco tensed when Severus finally cracked after four Death Eaters from the Inner Circle had finished their 'turns.' He had never seen his godfather lose his composure, no matter what situation he was in. Now, the sight of his godfather screaming and twisting uncontrollably on the ground was more than what Draco could bear. He noticed some of the newer Death Eaters shifted uncomfortably while those within the Inner Circle enjoyed their 'privilege' to torture the traitor.

And his father… From what Draco had seen, Severus was supposed to be his father's closest friend, or his father wouldn't have named him his godfather. But his father hadn't shown a trace of hesitation as he tortured Severus. The sadistic pleasure he was able to detect from his father's eyes made Draco feel sick.

Whether it was because of his father's training or his Occlumency skill, Draco managed to keep his inner turmoil at bay. Through the white mask, the pair of grey eyes revealed nothing but cold indifference as they took in the merciless scene before him.

It was disconcertingly easy, given the situation. It scared him at how easily he had been able to lock away his compassion towards his godfather and his disgust at the other Death Eaters. But then, he was in no position to help Severus, and he had no intention of ending up in Severus' situation.

"Now, now, Bellatrix, out Lord needs him alive and sane," his father commented idly.

"Oh, we both know Severus is not that easy to break, Lucius." Bellatrix smirked and released the Cruciatas curse after a few more seconds. "Aren't you, Severus?" she asked in a cooing tone that Draco had always hated.

Bellatrix finally stepped back, but it was not over yet. Draco held his breath as his father turned to him, as did some of the other Death Eaters.

"Come on, son," said his father from beside him. "Have fun."

Draco stared at the barely recognizable form of his godfather. Uncertainly crept over him as he contemplated what he should do. He hesitated, even though he knew he couldn't afford any.

"Draco, remember what I've taught you," said his father in a low voice with a warning undertone that didn't escape him.

And of course he did remember. His father had drilled it in him since he was a child.

"Don't get too attached to them, son, they are but disposable tools."

His father had told him that one night after a family party, referring to the guests that had just left.

Just tools, was it? Draco braced himself and stepped forward, stopping before his godfather.

He felt disgusted at his own action, but he was a Slytherin, he told himself, and survival always came first.

He raised his wand and cast the first spell that came to his mind. Ironically, it was the first dark curse his godfather had taught him.

"Sectumsempra!"

A/N: So, what do you think? Personally, I think I've done too many switches of POV in this chapter.

Anyway, in case you want to ask, Voldemort chooses to reveal Severus as a spy now because Severus is no longer useful for him. Ever since he's found out about Severus, he's been using him to control how the Order would react to his attacks, how fast they would be notified of them, etc. (You can see the effects of both raids from previous chapters and from Voldemort's POV in this chapter). Now that he's 'staged' his dramatic return, he doesn't need Severus anymore.

Chapter 23: Painful Truth

The Slytherin common room was in dead silence. More than half of the house was present. They had all gathered there after dinner, for what, no one could tell, or no one would dare to say out loud.

Draco seated himself on a couch near the center of the room, along with the group of students that unofficially lead the house. Goyle was sitting next to him, staring ahead blankly, but not in his usual stupidity. Draco had never seen Goyle like that before and he honestly didn't know what to do with him. The most he could do for Goyle, whose father had been killed by an Auror earlier that day, was to leave him to mourn alone.

Draco turned away from Goyle to the rest of the room. They were all sitting there in silence with occasional whisperings here and there. The atmosphere was solemn, but oddly comforting. And that was what this was all about, wasn't it? Even if everyone out there failed to understand them, at least they still had one another. They offered each other comfort, because no one else would.

Draco sighed and leaned back on the couch. The moment Dumbledore announced Nott's death was something none of them would ever forget.

Though none of them had shown it outwardly, Nott's death had hit them hard. Unlike Goyle's father, Nott was one of them, someone who had walked the same path that most of them would one day follow.

They all knew why Nott had been in Diagon Alley. They all knew what had happened to him. No one from outside the house would have noticed, but the death of Theodore Nott had shocked them all to the core.

Suddenly, the fantasy of one day joining the Dark Lord had become so much more realistic. It was just like what Draco had experienced when he first witnessed his father torture one of the Dark Lord's prisoners.

The shock should have brought some of them away from the Dark Lord, but that was not the case. Everyone in the school had been stunned when Dumbledore made the announcement, but soon…

"But why was he there in the first place?"

"He's a bloody Death Eater. I tell you." The Great Hall had been so quiet that everyone could hear the comment clearly.

Before anyone could find out who had said that, whisperings broke out from all over the Great Hall.

"He's one of those who killed my…"

"He should have expected it…"

"Serve him right…"

Dumbledore shot out sparks from his wand to silence the students. He stood up with a solemn expression on his face.

The Slytherins sat in complete silence. The damage was done. In those short ten minutes, whatever had once connected them to the rest of the students was gone.

Draco shook his head. He himself didn't think much on Nott's death. It was disturbing, true, but not unexpected. Of course, there were Death Eaters who deserved to die much more than Nott, but war was never about fairness. Still, many Slytherins, especially the younger ones, had little idea of how cruel the war could be. Draco would not be surprised if what had happened tonight would push many of the younger Slytherins into the Dark Lord's rank.

What was between Slytherin and the other houses was beyond simple rivalry now. Hogwarts was falling apart from within, and Draco felt a sense of dread when he thought of what was going to happen to his house. They didn't even have a head of house anymore.

No one in the room knew about that, and those who had been at the Death Eater meeting knew enough to keep things to themselves. The rest of the house would know soon enough.

Wordlessly, Draco stood up and left for his dorm. What he had seen and done today weighted heavily upon him. He was exhausted and he wanted nothing more than to rest. But his day not over yet, he still had a report to make, and a meeting to attend. Hopefully then, he would be able to find out more about what had happened to Harry.

Pain. It was the only thing Severus felt when he awoke. There was an iron taste in his mouth. Dried blood.

He lay panting on the cold stone floor for a long while. The pain seemed to have become a little more bearable as his body slowly adjusted to it. Carefully, he pushed himself up and settled near the corner of the cell he was being kept in.

His mind was still foggy from the tortures, but he willed himself to think. He knew very well that no one had ever escaped from the Dark Lord's dungeons, but he was not about to give in to the thought of dying.

A wave of familiar coldness caused Severus to shiver. He shut his eyes and leaned back against the cold wall. Of course the Dark Lord would keep his Dementors down here. Together with the Dementors, it was a complete picture of Azkaban, only that Azkaban wouldn't allow any visitor.

Severus was no fool. He knew the only reason he was still alive was because the Dark Lord wanted something from him. This could be used to his advantage, or at least buy him some time, but Severus knew very well it was never a good idea to test the Dark Lord's patience. If he wanted to live through this, he would have to trend very carefully, and if the situation called for it…

He stared out through the barred door grimly. He had been told of a number of crucial bits of information on the Order of the Phoenix and

on the war they were currently having. Most of them had been necessary for his spying mission. The rest had been Dumbledore's way to secure his loyalty. Or rather, to remind him why he had to keep that arrogent brat alive.

He shivered again. The dementors drifted closer and memories were slowly drawn out through his mental barrier. Sverus gritted his teeth. He couldn't lose control of his own thoughts now, but Occlumency had no effects on dementors, as he had found out first hand himself long ago.

The cold presence of the dementors came closer and closer, surrounding Severus in a sea of blackness and drowning him with his own dark memories…

"Severus, Severus, such a disappointment."

The coldness slowly dispersed as a cold voice brought Severus back to reality. Still caught up in his own memories, he turned his gaze numbly to the figure standing outside the barred door.

"Look at yourself, Severus," said the Dark Lord. "I accepted you back when you begged for my forgiveness one year ago, and yet you still cling to a man who would not hesitate to send you to death and an Order that would never trust you."

Severus remained silent, cursing himself inwardly for his carelessness of losing himself to the dememtors. He concentrated on calming himself and repairing the damage the dementors had caused on his Occlumency shield.

The Dark Lord watched on in amusement. "Remarkable skills at shielding your thoughts as always, Severus," he said. "But the old fool's reluctance in using Dark Magic, even the boundary ones like Occlumency, has cost you your life. Dumbledore never bothered to teach his little puppets to protect their minds." Voldemort rumbled on. "You'd be interested in what I extracted from Arthur Wesaley's mind, Severus."

Severus closed his eyes to hide his annoyance. So that was why he had been found out. Only a few in the Order knew that he was a spy, and Weasley was one of them. He clenched his fists. All because of neglecting such a simple precaution.

"Now, Severus, perhaps you would like to answer some of me questions," said Voldemort, raising his wand at the same time.

Severus steeled himself. So it began.

Nicolas Flamel paced the length of his living room. He was worried. Harry had gone to him earlier this morning, using his house as a convenient detour to head for the Death Eater meeting. It was well into evening now and still Harry was no where to be seen. Whatever Tom might have cooked up for the boy should have been over by now. Of course, Harry could have apparated back to Hogwarts directly, but Nicolas couldn't help feeling worried, especially since he had heard of something about a raid in Diagon Alley.

He stopped in his track and turned around as the fire in his fireplace flickered and changed color. He frowned. Harry wouldn't come here by floo, neither would Tom, for that matter…

He glanced at the fireplace and sighed inwardly. Of course it was Albus. And frankly, Nicolas didn't really want to see his old friend right now.

"Albus! It's been a long time, old friend." Nicolas greeted his visitor as he walked over to the fireplace.

"Indeed, Nicolas," said Albus. "May I come over?"

Albus' serious look confirmed Nicolas' suspicion that this visit had something to do with the war, most likely with Harry.

"Of course." Nicolas stepped aside to let his friend come through, knowing this meeting was inevitable.

He briefly humored the idea of Tom choosing to pay him a visit at this particular time and shook his head. No, that would not end well.

"Your house hasn't changed much, Nicolas." Albus commented once they had seated. "It's near been a year, hasn't it?"

Nicolas nodded. "But you are not here to ask about me, I suppose, my friend?"

Albus smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes. "Indeed," he said quietly. He pulled out something from his pocket and placed it on the table before them. "Do you recognize this, Nicolas?"

Nicolas did, of course. It was one of the two portkey stones he had given out. He picked up the stone and examined it closely. It was Harry's.

He paled as he held the stone. Where did Albus get it? Had something happened to Harry? It was at a time like this that Nicolas would feel the helplessness caused by his partial isolation from the world.

"I found it on the ground after the battle in Diagon Alley." Albus was watching him intensely, though it was hardly what was worrying Nicolas.

"Where's Harry?" he asked, deciding there was no point pretending he didn't know anything about Harry. He knew there was no way his friend would fail to figure out his involvement.

Albus' eyes narrowed with a visible anger and impatience. Nicolas knew it was not the answer Albus wanted, but his friend would have to wait until he had heard of Harry's current situation.

Albus held his gaze for a while before answering tightly, "Harry is with Voldemort."

"With Voldemort?" Nicolas frowned. That could mean anything.

He was too old to be intimidated by the stern look Albus was giving him and they both knew it.

Finally Albus sighed. "I found Harry in Diagon Alley, but Voldemort took him away before I had the chance to. I believe he's at Voldemort's hideout at the moment."

Nicolas listened on thoughtfully. That was… unexpected. So Albus had found out about Harry at last. Nicolas didn't believe for a second that Albus would cause any harm to that child, but it seemed Tom had other ideas.

At least he now knew that Harry was safe… or as safe as he could hope for. Things were going to change quickly now, for the better or for the worse.

"I never knew you had any past association with Harry," said Albus. Nicolas nodded, expecting that. "Harry is Alex, isn't he?"

Nicolas looked up in surprise. So Albus had managed to figure that out too?

"Yes, he is."

Albus' gaze was accusing. "Time travel, Nicolas?"

Nicolas actually flinched this time. He had never thought his crazy invention would have brought about such great consequences. He knew Harry had suffered much because of him. But at the same time, as he recalled the happy face of young Tom Riddle and the changes he had witnessed in Voldemort this past few months, Nicolas couldn't help thinking, as selfish as it sounded, he wouldn't have it any other way.

For the next few minutes, Nicolas gave Albus a brief account of his invention, how it had been stolen and ended up being found by Harry.

"So you enrolled Harry into Hogwarts under the name Alex," said Albus slowly. "Did he really have no memories of the future events?"

Nicolas nodded. "He wouldn't have done what he had otherwise."

Albus frowned. "But why Tom Riddle?"

"Perhaps it's because of Harry's connection with Voldemort, or perhaps their personalities attracted each other." Nicolas gave his friend a sharp look. "Harry had no memory of Voldemort at all. What's between them is true friendship."

Albus rubbed his temple. "I don't doubt that," he said, sounding tired.

They sat in silence for some time. Nicolas waited patiently as his friend contemplated on what he had learned, or confirmed, since Nicolas honestly couldn't tell how much Albus hadn't already known. Finally Albus spoke up, "You knew Harry would be there today, didn't you, Nicolas?"

Nicolas let out a sigh. So the questioning had finally started.

"Yes, I knew Harry would be there," he answered carefully. He paused for a while before giving Albus the answer he had been waiting. "I knew Harry is a Death Eater."

"When did it happen?" asked Albus. Nicolas could tell his friend was trying hard to calm himself.

"Last year during Christmas," he answered. He had a feeling that this conversation was going to end in disaster.

Albus closed his eyes for a while. "And you never felt it necessary to tell me? You knew I would do anything to protect Harry."

Nicolas sighed. That was exactly the point. When he had first met Harry in the present time, he had been surprised at how little the boy knew of his own situation. Albus had a tendency to hide certain crucial details from Harry, and Harry was too smart not to notice. In the end, Albus' protectiveness only served to distant Harry further from him. It was no wonder Harry was reluctant to approach Albus for advice.

Nicolas himself had been uncertain about telling Albus the truth. He knew that while Albus might not share his opinion regarding Tom, he would understand Harry's motive. But at the same time Nicolas didn't want to break Harry's trust. He knew Harry needed his support much more than any protection. And he admitted that bringing Albus in at the wrong moment would only create more complications. He was certain that Albus would never have let Harry gone through with his plan had he known beforehand.

"It's not my place to tell, Albus," he said, knowing his friend would not be satisfied with this answer. "Harry's capable enough to look after himself and make his own decisions." He paused. "I'm sorry you have to find out this way."

"I attacked him, Nicolas." Albus leaned forward, the coldness of his eyes alarmed Nicolas. "I injured the one person I've been trying to keep safe for the past fifteen years, only to find that he's been joined with Voldemort for months! I don't know why you chose you keep this from me, but I expect some explanation now."

Nicolas tensed as he felt Albus' magic directed at him. It seemed he had really angered his old friend this time.

He sighed, trying to think of a way to best explain the situation. "Harry was very close to Tom Riddle during his time in the past," he began slowly. "I'm not sure if you are aware of it, Albus, but Harry cares deeply for his friends. And he is willing to sacrifice a lot for them."

Albus nodded. His anger seemed to have subsided a little.

"Harry was devastated when he regained his memories of Voldemort," Nicolas went on. "He was confused at what he should do, but he knew he must make a choice." Nicolas noticed Albus' pained look and sighed. "If it will make you feel better, Albus," he said softly, "in a way, Harry never joined Voldemort." He paused. "He plans to redeem him."

Albus' eyes widened. Nicolas could see his shock slowly melted into realization. He watched on in concern, unsure of how Albus would react.

"Is Voldemort aware of this?" asked Albus.

Nicolas nodded. He himself had pointed that out to Tom more than once.

Albus remained silence for a long time. When he finally eyed Nicolas again, only a trace of anger was left, together with no little amount of pain.

"From what I can see in the battle just now, Voldemort genuinely cares for Harry. But would that be enough?" said Albus quietly. "Redemption requires a person to realize his mistakes and willingly turn back. I can't see both from Tom."

Nicolas averted his friend's gaze. Albus' frank judgment had pained him much more than he had expected. He was filled with a sudden urge to defend Tom, but he knew it was useless, since he couldn't deny what Albus had said was indeed true.

"How long have you known of this, Nicolas?" asked Albus.

Nicolas could remember that night clearly. "Harry went to me the night he took the Dark Mark. He was filled with guilt of what he had done. He told me his whole plan then."

A flash of pain crossed Albus' eyes. "I see," he said softly. "Is there a way you can contact Harry, Nicolas?"

Nicolas shook his head. "No." Seeing the defeated look of his friend, he added quietly, "I'm sorry, Albus."

Albus sighed. "You believe Harry will succeed, don't you?" he asked. "Is that why you never stop him?"

Nicolas thought about that. "I don't know," he answered truthfully. "I believe Voldemort is not beyond redemption, and if anyone can turn him back, it would be Harry."

"I hope you are right, my friend. I hope you are right," said Albus softly. "There is nothing I can do for Harry now. He's chosen… a very difficult road indeed."

Nicolas had to agree. As much as he wanted to believe in Tom, he couldn't help feeling unsettled when he thought of how everything would turn out in the end.

"Who else knows of this, Nicolas?"

"I'm not sure who Harry has told," said Nicolas. "But as far as I know, young Percy Weasley is the first one who found out everything."

"Indeed?" said Albus, not looking as surprised as he sounded. "Interesting."

Albus said nothing at Nicolas' questioning look, instead he glanced at the clock hanging on the wall next to the fireplace. "This has taken longer then I assumed. I must head for the Order meeting now," he said, standing up and giving Nicolas a stern look. "I trust you will tell me if you have any news about Harry, Nicolas?"

Nicolas gave his friend an innocent smile. "Of course, Albus, of course."

Draco looked around the quiet muggle street he had just apparated to. He made sure the disillusionment charm on himself was still in place before walking down the street in caution. The street was empty, not surprising, since it was already well into the night.

It didn't take him long before he reached the end of the street, where a door that was strangely out of place was located.

Grimmauld Place. He had only been here once before, when Dumbledore introduced him to the Order of the Phoenix. He snorted at the memory. They were all suspicious of him and those ignorant 'light siders' had no idea what he and Severus had gone through to bring them their information. It was only natural, of course, and they

would be fools not to. But Draco couldn't help feeling bitter, especially after all that had happened at Hogwarts today.

Steeling himself, Draco pushed open the door of number twelve and entered the Order of the Phoenix Headquarters.

Several of what Draco assumed to be members of the Order were in the house. They glanced at him warily, but none commented on his presence; they all knew the place was well-guarded with Dumbledore as its secret-keeper.

Draco ignored them and headed straight to the room where he knew Dumbledore was holding a meeting. It amused him that Dumbledore had something akin to the Dark Lord's 'Inner Circle' in his Order. It consisted of those Dumbledore trusted most, in other words, those who would end up knowing a little more about their current situation than the others.

"Hey, you can't get in there, kid," someone Draco didn't recognize called out. "There's a meeting-"

The person was cut off when the door to the room swung open, inviting Draco in. Draco smirked and entered without a word.

As expected, the whole room turned quiet as he walked in. All occupants of the room turned to face him; most looked startled at his presence.

Understandable, seeing as he was indeed not supposed to be here. It should have been Severus' job.

"Please take a seat, Draco," Dumbledore's voice rang through the quiet room.

Draco took the nearest empty seat to the door. On his left was Molly Weasley, on his right was a grim-looking wizard he couldn't identify.

The room was a simple conference room with little more than a wooden table set in the middle of it. Unlike the other rooms in this house, every portrait in this room had been removed. He glanced at

the occupants of the room before focusing on the man sitting at the head of the table.

Looking at the pale face of Dumbledore, Draco wondered if he had already figured out what had happened to Severus. Most probably.

"You are here to report on Voldemort's meeting, I assume, Draco?"

Draco nodded. He calmed himself as much as he could before recalling a memory he would rather forget.

"The Dark Lord found out about Severus," he began slowly, his voice betraying none of his emotions. "He had him tortured, in turn, by his inner circle."

Several sharp breathes followed his statement.

"Where is Severus now?" asked Dumbledore softly, looking older than Draco had ever seen him before.

Draco felt a hint of sympathy for the old man before he crushed it forcefully. "I don't know," he said. "He's still alive. The Dark Lord wants to question him, so he told us... not to break him."

Draco was shock to find himself trembling. He desperately tried to calm himself, kicking himself for showing such vulnerability in front of-

He froze when he felt someone's arms wrapped around him in a gentle embrace. He heard a soothing voice. "Merlin, you are too young to witness such thing."

Instinct kicked in and Draco pushed the person away, his hand reflexively reaching to his wand. He looked up with wide eyes to see Molly Weasley. She looked startled for a short moment before her expression softened.

Draco looked away, feeling decidedly uncomfortable. The woman's action had caught him completely off guard.

Everyone in the room was focused on him, but Draco ignored them. He shifted his gaze back to Dumbledore. "The Dark Lord was satisfied with today's raid, but he didn't seem pleased for some reason."

"Do you think it's because of Severus?" asked Dumbledore.

Draco considered what he had seen today. "No," he answered. "He knew about Severus long before today."

"We need to rescue him, Albus," Lupin spoke up. The werewolf looked worn and tired.

Dumbledore nodded and turned to the only person who could do the job. "Could you try to locate and contact Severus, Draco? Severus is most likely being held in Voldemort's base."

"Albus!" To Draco's utmost surprise, it was McGonagall who had protested, on his account no less.

Dumbledore held up his hand to silent McGonagall before continuing, "Only do so when you are absolutely sure of your own safely, of course. I trust you to make the right judgment."

Draco doubted the last statement, but he accepted the job nonetheless. He had planned to do so anyway, that was the least he could do for his godfather. He quickly shoved that thought away before it brought up the memory of Severus' torture session.

The Weasleys looked uneasy. Of course, Arthur Weasley had been in the same situation, still was, in fact, if the Weasleys' claim of him still being alive was true. It had been Severus' job at that time, to try and locate where Arthur Weasley was being held.

The rest of the meeting consisted mostly of planning and Draco listened with mild interest. It would not be an easy task to turn the tide and he hoped it would not be too late if it did happen.

"Before the end of this meeting, I have a grave announcement."

This caught Draco's attention. He knew exactly what that was about. Dumbledore had said nothing beyond the obvious fact that Harry was missing to the whole school. Draco hoped the old man would see fit to reveal more now.

Dumbledore let his gaze fell on several of the room's occupants. Draco met the passing gaze calmly, trying not to give Dumbledore the impression that he knew more than he had let on.

"Harry Potter was captured by the Dark Lord."

Draco could tell it was a lie at once. He knew the Dark Lord did not need to capture Harry.

There was a short moment of stunned silence, before Dumbledore was bombarded with questions.

"What?"

"But he was at school, how's that possible?"

"Why didn't you tell us earlier, we could have-"

"Silence!" Dumbledore shouted, with the same tone he used to silence students at Hogwarts' Great Hall, Draco noted.

"Harry's scar connected him to Voldemort. It would seem that Voldemort has used this connection to lure Harry to Diagon Alley."

"Harry was in Diagon Alley?" asked Lupin. His face was pale and his concern was written over his face.

Dumbledore nodded. "I was unfortunately blocked by dementors when Voldemort disapparated with Harry."

Draco looked around the room. A few were frowning, others looked worried, especially those who knew Harry personally.

"But what does You-Know-Who want from Potter?" someone spoke up.

Moody snorted. "Nonsense. He's been trying to kill the boy ever since-"

Dumbledore once again stopped the argument. "I believe Harry's not in any danger at the moment."

"What do you mean, Albus?" said McGonagall.

"From my brief encounter with Voldemort, I don't think he is trying to hurt Harry. His true intention is unclear, but I believe Harry is safe for now."

Draco frowned inwardly, turning over what little information Dumbledore had provided in his head. Dumbledore had seen Harry in Diagon Alley, that much was certain. And that would also mean that Dumbledore had found out Harry was a Death Eater. So, the old man wanted to keep it silent then?

"But why? What does he want?"

"I'm not certain at the moment, but first, we need to ensure Harry's safety."

Ensure Harry's safety, not rescue. Dumbledore didn't seem anxious to bring Harry back, instead he looked… sad.

Dumbledore once again turned to Draco, his gaze intense. "Do you have information on that, Draco?"

Did you see Harry at the meeting? Draco could hear the underlying question. "No," he answered.

Dumbledore's gaze didn't leave him for a while, and Draco felt himself tensed. "Then, Draco, would you also try to gather information about Harry?"

Draco agreed, but obviously someone didn't trust him with the job.

"Are you sure you are up to the job, Mr. Malfoy?" McGonagall looked skeptical.

"I am, professor," said Draco firmly, looking straight at his transfiguration professor, daring her to doubt him, even though she had no idea what had transpired between Harry and him this year.

"Albus, I would like to-"

"No, Remus." Dumbledore turned to the werewolf. "I understand you are worried about Harry, but I can't allow you to put yourself into danger. We need to know more about Harry's current situation first, any rush action would not only endanger your life, but Harry's as well. Please understand, Remus."

Draco eyed Lupin. The man was devastated. Black's death seemed to have hit him hard, and now he was hit with the news of Harry being 'captured'. Draco almost pitied Lupin. He was certain the man would break once he knew the truth about Harry.

"If there's nothing else, then I'd call this meeting to an end," said Dumbledore. "Get some rest, my friends, it's been a stressful day for us all."

Draco turned to leave, pondering on what he had just learned and thinking on his next move. He was near the door when he heard Dumbledore's voice.

"And Draco?" Draco stopped in his track and turned his head around. "If you have anything you want to tell me, you are always welcome to find me in my office."

Draco nodded briefly before following the group out of the room. Yes, Dumbledore definitely knew, or at least suspected, that he had hidden something from him.

Draco's glance shifted to the last person in the group that was moving out. Percy Weasley. The redhead seemed to be staying behind for some private talk with Dumbledore.

Draco had almost forgotten that the redhead also knew about Harry. Everything, it would seem. He had known the moment Harry told him that one of the Weasleys had learned of the whole truth that it would only mean trouble. He had no doubt the Gryffindor would burst out everything he knew at this perfect opportunity, he was surprised he hadn't already done so in front of every Order members.

But it wouldn't matter now. Dumbledore had known about Harry being a Death Eater, it wouldn't change that face if the old man was also told the other details. With luck, Dumbledore might even be able understand his precious golden boy's absurdly Gryffindor and suicidal intention regarding the Dark Lord.

What frustrated Draco was that he had no idea what had happened. Harry had not been in the Death Eater meeting just now, and he had not gone back to Hogwarts either. If what Dumbledore had said was true, then Harry must be staying with the Dark Lord, which was not a very comforting thought, considering what had just happened to Severus under the Dark Lord's order. But then, now that Dumbledore knew of his secret, staying anywhere near Hogwarts or the Order of the Phoenix might not be a good idea either.

Draco sighed. Wherever the stubborn idiot was, he would need all the luck to come out unscratched… if that was even possible.

Ignoring the questioning looks from his brothers, Percy lingered behind. He waited until everyone else had left the room before turning around to face Dumbledore.

"Why didn't you tell them, sir?" he asked in a low voice.

Dumbledore regarded him for a while before gesturing to the now empty room. "Take a seat, Percy."

Percy did so, waiting patiently as Dumbledore closed the door and took the seat opposite from him. The setting reminded Percy strongly of the times when he spoke with the headmaster in his school days as the head boy and he found himself tensing unconsciously.

But he was not a student anymore, he told himself, working in the Ministry had given him many experiences. He ran over the technique he had learned in the Ministry about meetings like this and felt his nervousness slowly fade away.

"Harry's not captured," he said quietly.

Dumbledore nodded. "You saw everything at Diagon Alley, I presume?"

"Yes," said Percy. "Why didn't you tell them the truth, sir?"

It was not easy to just forget all he'd been told about the old wizard during his time in the Ministry, but after working closely with the Order for several months, Percy had started to rebuild his trust and respect towards Dumbledore.

Dumbledore sighed. "The truth is a beautiful and terrible thing, Percy, and should therefore be treated with great caution." He looked up at Percy. "You may not understand yet, but sometimes we have to choose between telling the truth and protecting those we care for. Today, I chose the latter."

"For Harry?"

Dumbledore shut his eyes briefly as if in pain. "I'm afraid the ability to protect Harry is out of my hand," he said. "No, it was for the protection of those who would be hurt greatly by the news."

Percy remained silent. Lying to protect others from the truth… that was certainly not new to him. It had been done many times before; and Percy couldn't say he didn't see the point behind it. It was usually used in some trivial matters or things that would otherwise cause public chaos. But-

"They will find out the truth eventually," said Percy.

Dumbledore agreed. "That they would, but now is not the time."

Percy hesitated before asking, "What would happen once Harry's found?"

Dumbledore's eyes dimmed. "As I've said before, my ability to protect Harry has become very restricted, no matter what Harry's intention has been."

Percy looked up sharply. Intention?

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, I've heard of what Harry's intended to do. I've had an interesting conversation with my old friend Nicolas Flamel just before I attended this meeting." At Percy's surprised look, he leaned forward. "What I'm curious to know, Percy, is why did you keep your… findings a secret?"

Percy stared at the old wizard. He had decided to supply Dumbledore with everything he knew about Harry, but he had not expected this. It seemed one really must not underestimated Albus Dumbledore.

He had considered the answer to Dumbledore's question before, knowing Dumbledore would surely ask. He had had doubts about what to answer, but what he had seen in Diagon Alley had backed him up. He decided to settle with the truth.

"I want to give Harry's plan a chance, sir," he said. It was hard for him to admit he had covered for a very serious crime, but Dumbledore's previous confession about keeping secrets somehow made it easier. "The wizarding world will never have peace as long as You-Know-Who is there. The situation has gone way out of hand and the injuries or deaths are accumulating in a way that has never been seen before. You-Know-Who must be stopped, and… if there's any way that can defeat him, or simply just hinder him, I think it's worth a try."

Dumbledore's eyes had regained some of their usual twinkles and he was looking at Percy in a way that made him rather uneasy. "I must say I'm surprised you see it this way, Percy." Dumbledore seemed more curious than angry.

Percy felt himself flushing. He tried to gather his thoughts. "I never thought it was possible, sir, but… I can't deny what I've seen. I saw

You-Know-Who today, in Diagon Alley, he's… ruthless and cruel. He… he took pleasure at torture and murder." He suppressed a shiver at the memory of today's raid. "But he's…. different when Harry's there. He spared Tonks when Harry begged for her life. And he's saved Harry personally, twice."

Dumbledore looked surprised when Percy mentioned Tonks. "Twice?" he asked quietly.

Percy nodded. "Harry was injured in another raid, the one during Christmas. That was when I found out about him," he said. It was not hard to recall that eventful day. "I saw You-Know-Who rescue Harry, and heal him himself. He was almost-" He trailed off, unsure of what exactly he had felt from the Dark Lord.

Dumbledore looked thoughtful; the twinkles in his eyes were still there. "Is that why you volunteered to follow him today?"

"Yes," Percy admitted. "I wanted to see for myself."

"And what did you see?"

"He really cares for Harry," whispered Percy. A part of him criticized himself for making such an absurd statement, another part of him refused to deny the evidence that was right before his eyes. "I still don't believe that this alone is enough to stop You-Know-Who, but it's clear that he is affected by Harry, greatly."

Dumbledore was silent for a while. "Voldemort."

Percy tensed at the name. He stared at Dumbledore questioningly.

"Call him Voldemort, Percy. Fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself." Dumbledore gave him a gentle smile. "And I don't think you fear him all that much."

Percy had never thought about that. It seemed natural to just call him 'You-Know-Who', just as it was to fear him. Now, though, the Dark Lord had become more than a nameless monster he had learned to hate and fear.

"Voldemort," he whispered, shivering slightly out of habit as the sound came from his mouth. He looked into the twinkling eyes of Dumbledore. "He… has another name, right?" Percy tried to remember what Flamel had called the Dark Lord. "Tom." The name seemed all wrong. It was even stranger than saying 'Voldemort'.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows, but didn't ask where he'd learned this. "Tom Riddle, Voldemort's real name. Tom hates that name, but," he looked at Percy thoughtfully, "yes, I believe you can call him by that name, Percy."

Percy frowned. The train of thoughts was disturbing. "Still, he's responsible for many severe crimes. He needs to be stopped and pay for all he's done," he clarified, both to Dumbledore and himself. "Harry, too," he added quietly.

Dumbledore sighed wearily at that.

"Professor," Percy hesitated, but he knew Dumbledore should hear about it. "Harry… he has-"

Dumbledore held up his hand, the pain was visible in the pair of blue eyes. "I know very well what Tom requires his followers to do to prove themselves," he whispered.

Percy watched Dumbledore warily. He could easily see that Dumbledore was protective of Harry.

"When he's caught, will you-" Percy sat straighter in his seat and looked at Dumbledore firmly. "I hate to see Harry being sent to Azkaban, sir, but he's responsible for his own actions."

Dumbledore nodded grimly. "As we all are," he said softly.

It had been three days since the attack in Diagon Alley; three days since Harry had been brought to the Dark Lord's place. So far, he had not been summoned or given any mission. Voldemort seemed to

want nothing to do with him, except to keep him safe. Harry didn't know what to think of it. He found himself waiting, at the same time dreading, for his Dark Mark to burn.

Harry wandered aimlessly along the corridor of Voldemort's manor with Nagini in tow. He was cloaked in Death Eater costume with the mask concealing his face from the other Death Eaters. Judging from how the members of Voldemort's inner circle had reacted towards him, Harry had decided showing his face in the manor was not a good idea and, for once, he had no intention of causing any more trouble than he was already in, at least for now.

According to Nagini, this manor had been the family house of a line that had been wiped out by Voldemort during his first campaign. Harry failed to find out anything specific about its location, only that it was located in some remote area near the border of the country.

The manor was enormous but at the same time well-furnished and clean, which Harry assumed was the work of house-elves, though he had seen none in the manor so far. Harry had yet to explore the building, but Nagini had given him a rather animated description of it. The manor roughly consisted of a main hall in which Voldemort sometimes met with his most trusted followers, Voldemort's private quarters, the living quarters of the Death Eaters, various facilities like potions labs, and a large dungeon.

For the past three days, Harry had kept mostly to his room and a few corridors near it. He simply didn't feel like exploring. What had happened in Diagon Alley still weighted heavily on him. With all the changes that had occurred, Harry wanted nothing more than to just lock himself up in his room. But that would not help the situation and he knew it, so he had not protested when Nagini dragged him out of his room.

Harry spent much time with Nagini now, his former pet had been keeping him company ever since he had awaken three days ago. Harry appreciated that more than anything. He would have been driven insane by the suffocating atmosphere around the place if not for her constant company.

Nagini had told him it was not often that Voldemort allowed his Death Eaters to take up residence in his manor, only the trusted or useful ones would be given entrance to the place. Nearly all Death Eaters that were living in the manor were wanted by the Ministry. They seldom bothered each other and Harry intended to keep it that way. Voldemort had, purposefully or not, given Harry a room away from the area generally occupied by his other Death Eaters, and for that Harry was grateful.

Harry walked down the stairs to an area he had not ventured into before. A Death Eater passing by stopped at the sight of him. The Death Eater stared at him curiously, then turned his gaze to the huge serpent beside Harry's leg. The Death Eater's eyes widened in recognition.

Detecting trouble, Harry turned his face away and strode down the corridor, ignoring the fearful gaze following his back. He held his head high in an imitation of Draco, daring the Death Eater to question him. He knew this particular one must be relatively new, since, to Harry's dismay, every Death Eater in the inner circle, save Snape, recognized him even when he had his mask on.

/Here is the manor's library. Master has his own in his private quarters,/ Nigini piped up helpfully as they neared a set of double doors.

Library. Harry found himself smiling. Now at least he could find something to occupy his time. If Hermione knew how he'd lightened up at the notion of spending time in a library…

Harry shook his head before that thought carried itself too far. He pushed open the door and entered the library, holding it a little longer for Nagini to slip through. He looked around curiously. The library itself was not as large as Hogwart's. Bookshelves lined the walls; each of them filled with books arranged by their subjects.

Harry relaxed a little when he found no one else was there but him and Nagini. He wandered around the place, amazed at the vast variety of books it contained. Some of the books would have clearly

belonged to the restricted section had they been at Hogwarts, and some of them would never have made it into the castle at all.

Harry turned away from the Dark Arts section, deciding that he would much rather spend his time with some lighter subjects, literally.

A tall and large shelf next to the wall caught Harry's attention. There were no books on it, but stacks of papers. On closer inspection, Harry saw that they were all old Prophets. The collection was sorted by date, up until yesterday's issue. The only window to the outside world, thought Harry wryly, seeing as most occupants in this manor were either wanted or presumably dead.

Harry took out yesterday's copy from the pile, then paused. What if his name was all over the paper? He sighed. He could just imagine Rita Skeeter's delight at the shocking news of the-boy-who-lived turning over to the enemy.

Taking in a deep breath, he looked down at the paper in his hands. Frowning, he flipped through the whole paper and the ones from the past two days. His name was in the paper, but there was no mention of him being a Death Eater at all, instead there were news about him missing, presumably kidnapped by the Dark Lord.

So Dumbledore had hid it, or was it the Ministry? But why?

He flipped through the Prophet again. There was very little news about Voldemort. A large portion of the paper was filled with messages from the Minister and department heads ranting on what measures they have taken and how everyone had nothing to fear as long as they followed the Ministry's instructions. Successful Death Eater captures were made news headlines with large captions and unnecessary descriptions on the Aurors' part, making the news more like a show boasting the Ministry's efficiency. Harry shook his head. It seemed some things would never change.

He flipped through the paper half-heartedly when a large photo of Wormtail caught his attention. His eyes widened as he read on. Pettigrew was captured?

His initial reaction was joy, happy that Sirius' name was finally cleared and that the rat got what he deserved. Then his stomach gave a strange churn. A cold feeling crushed down on his initial happiness, reminding him of his own situation.

Numbly, he returned to the paper. Beside the photo of the unconscious Wormtail under wand point was Sirius, the same photo Harry had seen in his third year as an escaped convict. Harry wondered why they hadn't taken a new one since Sirius was now officially free. Or was he? Knowing the Ministry, Harry felt he couldn't be sure.

His eyes followed the passage beneath Sirius' photo and froze. The Prophet fell soundlessly to the ground as his world was turned upside down.

The pain ended suddenly. Severus pushed himself up from the ground, struggling to keep his body from trembling, a sign of prolonged exposure of the cruciatus curse. The Dark Lord was standing outside his cell with his wand still raised, as if he had not intended to end the curse so early. Voldmort narrowed his eyes, responding to something Severus could not see.

The Dark Lord slowly lowered his wand and focused on Severus again, no trace of the previous disturbance remained.

"Dumbledore did not trust me enough to tell me that," said Severus through his teeth.

Severus tried to remain focused. It was getting harder for him to think clearly. How long had it been? Three days?

For days, Voldemort had been attempting to extract everything useful from him. Being a strong Occlumens and immune to Veritaserum, the Dark Lord had taken to torturing him for answers. Severus gritted his teeth, he could tell the monster was treating it as a twisted game and was enjoying it. So far, Severus had managed to reveal only two

pieces of true information, both of which would not do the Order much harm.

But something was not right. Severus had noticed how unusually patient his former master had been, as if the Dark Lord was trying to wear him down. Voldemort was after something, something he didn't expect to get by mere interrogation, but by force.

He had been shocked when he realized what that was. The prophecy.

Voldemort had mentioned obtaining the prophecy soon after he had been resurrected, but he had abandoned the plan in favor of building his own army a few months later. Severus couldn't see what had made the Dark Lord so interested in the prophecy again.

"I knew you, Severus," Voldemort hissed. "You would not have saved the boy's life twice had you not been convinced of his… usefulness." He pointed his wand at Severus again. "I'll ask you again, what is the prophecy about?"

"I was not given the information," said Severus firmly, with some of his usual coldness.

"Crucio!"

Another round of torture, another round of pain. Severus was left panting on the cold ground after several minutes.

Without warning, a strong force pushed into his mind. Severus' Occlumency held, barely.

"Impressive, Severus." Voldemort regarded him in dark amusement. "But even the strongest shield will be crushed under pressure… especially for someone with a history like yours."

Severus knew the Dark Lord was talking about the dementors. The weakening of his Occlumency was obvious, and Severus dreaded what would happen when Voldemort finally manage to break his last defense.

Dumbledore believed Potter to be the one to defeat the Dark Lord. Severus couldn't see how that spoiled brat could do that. He had never been convinced of the boy's usefulness, as the Dark Lord had suggested. No, he was protecting the boy for a much simpler reason.

Lily.

It was all for Lily. For her, Severus would protect that boy. For her, he would die before giving Voldemort the prophecy.

As if knowing what Severus was thinking, Voldemort narrowed his crimson eyes. "You will give me the prophecy whether you want to or not." A sadistic glint crossed his eyes. "I will break you, Severus Snape."

A/N: I know many of you are waiting for a Harry-Voldemort interaction. I've actually tried to do one in the previous chapter, but it just didn't work out, there's no way Voldemort would voluntarily visit Harry. There should be one in the next chapter though... In any case, you would definitely see how everything is affacting Voldemort next time.

Chapter 24: Loyalty

Voldemort put down the book he was reading as Nagini slithered into his room.

/Master, Alex is-/

/Don't call him by that name, Nagini,/ Voldemort hissed. Nagini recoiled at the anger in his voice and lowered her head in a bow. /What has Potter done this time?/

/He's been very quiet after returning from the library. He seems disturbed by the death of Sirius Black. It's been two days, Master, and he's barely even talked to me-/

/That's enough./ Voldemort raised his hand to stop Nagini. /You may go now./

Nagini was not satisfied. /But Master, he has-/

/I said that's enough, Nagini!/ Voldemort snapped. /You can spend your time with the boy, but I don't need to hear your report on him, understood?/

He could sense fear coming from his pet. /Yes, Master./ Nagini lowered her head again and fled the room.

He snarled. How dare Nagini remind him of the boy? How dare his pet line up with Potter against-

That was ridiculous. Potter had taken his Mark, yet he had been acting like anything but a Death Eater. The boy had defied him, questioned his orders and failed to even defend himself. He shouldn't have been allowed to live, let alone have been protected.

But Voldemort had saved him, again. This time from those Potter had once sided with. The decision had come naturally, and it was not just a miscalculated impulse. He could remember seeing the boy lying unconscious behind Dumbledore; he could remember how close the

deadly green light, shot out from his own wand, had come to hitting the boy. He simply could not imagine himself leaving Potter behind to face those the boy had betrayed… for him.

Voldemort narrowed his eyes. He had allowed this to go too far. He would protect Potter for now, but only because the boy still had his usefulness; Dumbledore's reaction in Diagon Alley had made that clear. He would wait until he got the prophecy, then he could decide the best way to deal with the boy, once and for all.

It would take time though, Severus was hard to break, and he could not be too forceful, or he would risk driving Severus insane and losing the prophecy that was no doubt in the spy's mind.

In the mean time, he couldn't just let Potter spend his time here idly. Every Death Eater whom had taken up residence in his manor had their own errands and duties, Potter should not be any exception. Besides, he didn't need Nagini's report to know Black's death was disturbing Potter; the boy's emotions had distracted him more than once in the past few days, and that needed to be stopped.

Voldemort's eyes fell onto the book he had abandoned on his desk and a possible solution came to him. Potter would be well protected that way. And at the same time the boy could still be of use to him.

Yes, that would work. Perhaps he could use Potter to his advantage after all.

Harry was wandering alone near the edge of the forest surrounding Voldemort's manor. He knew it was not the safest place in the world, with the inferi and dementors lurking in the forest, but he needed to get out of the manor, away from the Death Eaters around the place that constantly reminded him that he was one of them, one of those who had killed Sirius.

He winced at the name. He had known the moment he had decided to join Voldemort that he would end up losing everyone he held dear. He had thought he had accepted that, but now… the thought of how

much he had disappointed everyone and how utterly selfish his decision had been were crushing down on him, worsened by the death of a man he had neglected in his determination to get to a friend he wasn't even sure still existed or not.

In his musings, his feet had carried him further away from the manor. From his place, Harry could see the back of the manor.

The sun was already setting, and though he didn't like the idea of going back to the manor, Harry didn't fancy staying anywhere near the forest when the night came either.

He was about to make his way back when two Death Eaters came into view. Harry quickly ducked into the forest, hidden from sight by a tall tree. The Death Eaters didn't seem to have seen him. They walked past his hiding spot without stopping. In the middle of them floated an unconscious man who Harry couldn't recognize. The group disappeared from view into a part of the forest Harry had yet to reach.

With a moment hesitation, Harry cast a silencing spell on himself and followed. He kept a safe distance and he soon lost sight of the Death Eaters. But it didn't matter. Along the direction they had disappeared into was a clear path, one that suggested frequent usage.

Harry followed the path cautiously. Before long, he found himself staring at a pair of heavy iron doors. From the look of it, the doors seemed to be connected to some sort of underground tunnel. Nagini had never mentioned this place to him, though it seemed this area was known to the other Death Eaters.

Harry hid himself from view and waited quietly. About ten minutes later, the doors were pushed open and the pair of the earlier Death Eaters emerged from it. The unconscious man was not with them, giving Harry a dreadful suspicion of where these doors were leading to.

He knew he should turn back, but at the same time he was compelled to know what was happening behind these doors, especially if his suspicion was correct.

Squaring himself, Harry made sure his mask was still in place and moved out from his hiding place. He stopped before the doors and pushed it open, or tried to. The doors were loc-

Without warning, Harry could felt magic passing from the doors to his hand, his left hand, which was still connected to the cold metal surface. There was a brief burning sensation coming from his Dark Mark, though nothing similar to Voldemort's summons, and he could hear the doors click open.

Slightly taken back at what had happened, Harry hesitantly ventured forward. Before him was a long staircase leading underground, towards the general direction of the manor. He was now certain where he was heading to – The manor's dungeon, the place Nagini had told him to avoid. His former pet snake had been evasive about this place; she had even refused to tell Harry where the entrance was. Harry had dismissed that then, not wanting to upset his only companion and too busy dealing with all that had happened. And now, he suspected he already knew why Nagini had been so reluctant in showing him this part of Voldmort's lair.

Harry descended the stairs carefully. The place was dark; the only sources of light were the torches in buckets hanging along the stone walls. It didn't take long before he reached the bottom of the stairs. His throat went dry as the dungeon came into sight. A long corridor led out before him with lots of intersections along the way. The stone walls were lined with bared doors and Harry could hear faint screams echoing from the deeper part of the enclosed dungeons.

He shivered. So this place was indeed where Voldemort kept his prisoners.

The temperature seemed to be significantly lower down here. And this kind of coldness was one that Harry knew very well.

Dementors.

Fortunately for him, none was in sight. Harry knew he should probably leave before he could get into any trouble, or run into the dementors. But his feet carried him forward. How could he possibly

leave when he knew what he would surely find behind those barred doors? He simply couldn't bring himself to turn back, knowing there were innocents down here, all with little hope of ever getting out alive… or even the hope of just having a quick and painless death.

His heart was racing as he passed cell after cell. He found himself gritting his teeth. What had these people done to deserve this?

He passed by a Death Eater on his way, but, being in Death Eater custom, Harry's presence was not even questioned.

It was not long before Harry was thoroughly sick of what he had seen. A part of him, a part that had been emerging ever since he had read of what had happened to Sirius, urged him to do something, anything to get these prisoners out of here. At the same time this thought emerged, though, Harry forced himself to calm down. There was no way he could break all these prisoners out of Voldemort's dungeon. He needed time to think of the best way to help them.

He forced himself to look away from the bony woman with hopeless eyes in one cell and turned into a corridor that should bring him back to the entrance. He passed by three successive empty cells, then he stopped short. He took in a sharp breathe, his eyes widened when he recognized who was in that cell.

"Mr. Weasley?" the words left Harry's mouth in a whisper.

The man in the cell sat limply against a wall. For a moment, he didn't appear to have heard Harry, but then he stirred and lifted his head slowly.

Harry felt a lump in his throat. The man looked nothing like the Mr. Weasley he remembered, though it was no mistake of his identity. Mr. Weasley was pale and very thin. He was clearly starved. Harry could also see some visible signs of torture. His robe was in rags, and he looked as if he had not moved from his sitting position for a long time. The once warm and humorous blue eyes of were replaced by a hollow and haunted look that Harry had seen too often lately.

"Death Eater…" said Mr. Weasley hoarsely. "Kill… kill me. Take all you… want. Don't hurt…"

Mr. Weasley continued to mumble under his breathe, as if he was caught up in his own world.

Harry swallowed and edged closer to the barred door tentatively. "Mr. Weasley?"

"Leave Molly alone. Don't…" He shook his head. "No, not them… just… kill me. Take me… don't…. they won't…"

Harry closed his eyes against churning pain in his chest. "Mr. Weasley," he said in an equally hoarse voice. Reaching up with shaking hand, Harry removed his mask and pulled back his hood, revealing his face. "It's me, Harry."

Mr. Weasley jerked at the name. "Harry?" He tried to push himself up. "Leave… before they… Run along... now… I'll wait for the others…"

Harry shook his head, clenching the bars of the cell with his hands so he was as close to Mr. Weasley as possible. "I'm safe, Mr. Weasley, everyone is safe. You must get out of here now." He gritted his teeth at his own statement. What should he do? He thought in anguish.

Before Harry could make any decision, a red beam shot out from the dark end of the corridor, flying straight at Harry and throwing him backward onto the ground. The next second, a wand was pointed at his throat.

Lucius Malfoy looked down at him with, smirking in triumphant. "Planning a little break out, aren't we, Potter? I've known you've been faking your loyalty since the very first day."

Harry managed to retort in his panic. "Are you saying the Dark Lord has made a mistake?"

Malfoy snarled. "We'll see what the Dark Lord has to say about this, Potter."

Before Harry knew what was happening, his world turned dark as Lucius Malfoy stunned him non-verbally.

"Your presence is not required, Lucius," said Voldemort coldly. "You know what to do with Weasley, proceed as planned. Leave, now."

Lucius bowed, glancing at the stiffened Potter standing next to him and strode out of the room.

The doors closed behind Lucius and Voldemort turned to the only other occupant of the manor's main hall.

"Crucio!"

Potter fell to his knees, but didn't scream out. Voldemort ended the curse within a few minutes.

"I wasn't trying to break him out," said Potter in between panting.

Voldemort narrowed his eyes. "But you would have, had Lucius not found you." He strode forward and stopped before the boy, who was still kneeling. "And still would, if you manage to find a way to escape afterwards, isn't that right, Potter?" Potter looked ready to protest, but Voldemort went on. "Your thoughts cannot escape me. You should have known that very well."

Potter stared at the ground. "I haven't thought of what I would do," he said quietly. "I didn't expect to find Mr. Weasley… there." He shivered visibly.

Had Potter lied, Voldemot would have killed him right there. He had gone into great length to protect Potter; any thought of betrayal was not acceptable. Fortunately for Potter, Voldemort could detect no lie from him.

"Crucio!"

Potter did scream this time. It was a well deserved punishment, too light, even.

The thought of Potter secretly trying to aid Dumbledore's side enraged him far more than Severus' betrayal had.

"If I find out you've strayed out of place again, Potter," he said as he ended the curse, "I will personally torture you until you no longer know who you are, like those worthless worms in the dungeon."

Potter gritted his teeth. "How could you?" he said, his voice hoarse from the screaming. His narrowed eyes stared straight at Voldemort. "They have done nothing to deserve this!"

In the pair green eyes, Voldemort could see something he had not seen from the boy since… the Triwizard Tournament.

Anger. Directed at him.

Something stirred within him. Something he had not felt for a long time… guilt.

Voldemort clenched his fists and shoved away that feeling. How dare Potter make him feel this way? The boy was the one at fault.

"Leave!" he commanded as Potter struggled to get to his feet. "Get out of my sight!"

Potter left, wisely remaining silent.

It was two days later that Voldemort summoned Potter again. Instead of summoning him to the main hall, where thy boy had been tortured just days ago, Voldemort had chosen to meet Potter right outside the manor.

Five minutes after the summons, Potter came into view. Voldemort turned around as he heard footsteps approaching him. Potter jogged towards him from the direction of the manor, his hand clenching his

left forarm tightly. Voldemort was not surprised to see that Nagini had followed as well. His pet snake slithered to his side as Potter stopped a few steps before him.

Potter's face showed nothing, but Voldemort could tell that the individual summons made him nervous.

"Come," said Voldemort, gesturing Potter to follow.

Potter hesitated as Voldemort walked right into the forest, but he tailed behind him nonetheless.

"What-"

Voldmoert glanced back at Potter's startled shout. The boy was staring to his right; his hand had reached into his wand pocket.

"They are the inferi, Potter," said Voldemort. "They won't hurt you… as long as I don't give the command." He turned around to face the boy. "We are here to discuss your… position within my ranks today, Potter. Since you are so reluctant to kill," He ignored the visible flinch of the boy, "you will aid my army in another way."

Potter grew wary at that.

"The inferi are not like any creatures." He gestured at the inferi surrounding them. "They are corpuses infused with magic. They have no life and they can only be made to follow the simplest commands. But they are immune to most magic and that make them a powerful force, especially in large groups."

Potter grimaced, obviously remembering how effective his army of inferi had been in Diagon Alley.

"From now on, you will be responsible to command them in any attacks I send you to."

Potter looked taken back. "What?"

"If you can't even do that, then you are worthless to me," said Voldemort coldly. "Or are you already planning to run back to the old fool, Potter?"

Potter bit his lips and shook his head. He paused for a moment before speaking. "But how can I do that? Those… inferi only answer to you."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes at the boy's disrespect. Potter lowered his head, but offered no apology.

Voldemort chose to overlook that this time. "You are connected to the inferi, Potter, through me." He glanced at the scar on Potter's forehead. "Your scar should give you the ability to command the inferi that are bonded to my magic."

Potter looked around at the inferi, still looking shocked and uncertain.

"The spell to command them works similar to the imperious curse, which I hope you are competent enough to cast." At Potter' numb nod, he went on. "The manor's library should have all the information you need. You will be going on raids in two weeks time, and I expect to see results then. Am I understood, Potter?"

Potter nodded again wordlessly.

Voldemort stared at the boy coldly for a while before turning around to leave.

"Wait."

Voldemort whirled around, narrowing his eyes in impatience.

Potter was staring at the ground. "I…" He looked up tentatively. "Did you… did you order Sirius to be…"

He trailed off, but somehow Voldemort already knew what he was asking.

"No," he said. "I didn't order your godfather's death, Potter." He eyed the boy, who seemed to be greatly relived by that.

And what if he had given that order? To Voldemort's surprise and disgust, he found that Potter was not the only one who was relieved. Nonetheless, this needed amendment.

"Black was a member of the Order, Potter," he said, "and as such, an enemy. Any of Dumbledore's dogs should not be allowed to live, regardless of whether there's an order or not."

A flash of anger crossed Potter's eyes.

"Of course," he said tightly.

The contempt in the boy's tone stirred up Voldemort's anger. What had happened yesterday would not happen again. He would not tolerate this impudence.

"Crucio!"

The inferi closed in at Potter's scream, but Voldemort ignored them. At Nagini's third plead for him to stop, Voldemort finally ended the curse.

He grabbed the boy by the collar and yanked him to his feet, paying little attention to the blood staining his hand. He held his wand with his other hand and held it against Potter's throat.

"I will destroy you if you betray me, Harry Potter," he said coldly. "If you value your pathetic life, I would advise you not to give me any reason to even suspect your disloyalty, or you will not like the consequences."

He released the boy and, not sparing Potter a single glance, left the room for his private quarters.

Draco kept his face blank as he entered the Great Hall for lunch. He sat down beside the rest of his house's Quidditch team and ate in silence. Tomorrow was the Ravenclaw - Slytherin match, and Draco would bet a hundred galleons that the match would end up in a bloody mess. Even though Dumbledore and most of the staff were acting as if nothing was wrong, everyone could feel the tension among the students.

It was after a long debate that the school had decided not to cancel the rest of the Quidditch matches of the term. Dumbledore seemed to think Quiddich could at least keep the students' mind off the war, as well as alleviate some of the tension in the school. Draco had to once again question the old man's sanity if he really believed Quidditch matches could somehow bring the four houses back together.

It had been three weeks since the attack in Diagon Alley, and already three more Slytherins had received the Mark. He looked up at the staff table and rested his eyes on the empty seat of Severus. Dumbledore had yet to find someone to fill in the position of the head of Slytherin and Potions Master, whether it was because no one would want that job or because Dumbledore believed Severus would be back. Several of the younger students still had hope that their head of house was coming back, but Draco knew better.

He knew time was running out. The search for his godfather was hardly making any progress. The longer he delayed, the slimmer the chance of Severus still being alive.

Dumbledore had said Severus was most likely being held in the Dark Lord's manor. Draco had been there before once; his father had brought him there soon after he had been Marked. The Dark Lord would sometimes meet with his inner circle there, for individual meetings. The manor was in the middle of nowhere; Draco wasn't sure if it was even in this country. The Dark Lord had protected it so well that it was impossible to apparate to it without an actual summoning. And of course, there were still the dark creatures that surrounded the place if one did manage to sneak in.

It was becoming clearer to Draco as time passed that there was little chance for his godfather to survive. Even if he did manage to locate

him, what then? Even if Dumbledore was willing to go to such great length to retrieve his now-uncovered spy, it was not as if the old man's troops could storm the Dark Lord's place.

No one could escape the Dark Lord. Draco had learned this far too well.

He shivered at his own thought. The memory of the night Severus had been tortured came back to him. He remembered himself locking up his own emotions. His indifferent mask had slipped on almost effortlessly, and he had tortured his own godfather just like a heartless monster, just like… his father.

Having lost what little appetite he'd had, Draco left as soon as his team had finished discussing strategy for tomorrow's match.

Draco's time alone didn't last long though. He was nearing the library when he heard footsteps behind him.

"Malfoy!"

Draco turned around and sneered, recognizing the voice immediately.

"Weasley." And of course Weasley would not be alone. "Granger."

Weasley stepped forward. "We want to ask you something, Malfoy."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "That's hardly the tone one uses to ask someone a favor," he said. "But I suppose I can hardly expect a Weasley to know that."

Weasley turned red predictably. He was about to retort but Granger held him back.

"We want to ask you about Harry," she said slowly, looking as unwilling as Weasley.

And she should be, Draco was amazed that she was even able to utter those words. He glanced from Granger to Weasley. Of course they would be asking about Harry. Dumbledore had been keeping things as tight as possible; it was not a surprise that they hadn't managed to find out anything. But asking him of all people? The two must be really desperate.

"And what makes you think I know anything-"

"We've heard that many times," Granger cut him off. "Can you… can you just tell us what you know?"

Draco smirked. "What? Aren't you supposed to be his best friends?"

Weasley gritted his teeth and reached for his wand. "You-"

Granger grabbed his arm just in time, to Draco's disappointment. "It's not worth the trouble," said Granger, glaring at Draco. "Come on, it's not like he'd know more than we do." She turned around and left, dragging Weasley with her.

Draco watched the two's retreating back and rolled his eyes. "Hasn't Dumbledore said he's not in danger?" he drawled. The two Gryffindors turned back, but Draco went on before they had the chance to speak. "For once, believe what you're told and stop poking your nose around, or you might find yourself digging up something you don't want to know."

"What do you mean, Malfoy?"

Draco ignored Weasley and turned into the library. He doubted the two Gryffindors would actually listen to his warning, but he could care less about them. The truth would be out soon enough, whether they wanted it or not.

The next two weeks passed in chaos. And without anyone really realizing it, Easter had arrived. Less than one fourth of the students were remaining at school for the holidays this year, much less than

usual. Many parents had requested their children to come home due to the raging war. That was understandable, but the real question remained – how many of them were coming back after the holidays?

With the Ministry's inability to resume order, there had been frequent attacks on both the wizarding and the muggle worlds. And after that spectacular defeat in Diagon Alley, the Ministry and Dumbledore were both having a hard time regaining the people's trust. At the same time, the Dark Lord's minions had gained momentum from their victory in Diagon Alley and they were all eager to prove their worth to the Dark Lord.

Draco shook his head in disgust at his father's submissive behavior. He knew his father would do anything just to maintain his place as the Dark Lord's right hand man. His father had given that monster a lot of the Ministry's classified information; he had even led several raids himself.

After all that had happened, Draco could no longer feel hurt by his father's actions. He had become totally disappointed with his father. Now all he wanted was to prevent himself from becoming what his father had become.

It was with that in mind that Draco had come back home for Easter. On the third day of the holidays, his father had suddenly announced that they were going to the Dark Lord's manor. For once, Draco didn't need to fake his delight at the opportunity.

"We are leaving in ten minutes, son."

Being with his father would make things difficult, but Draco was not about to pass up his best chance to search for Severus. He worked to strengthen his Occlumency shield as he met his father outside of the Malfoy's manor.

"Are we having a meeting with the Dark Lord, father?" asked Draco, adding in a hint of eagerness in his tone.

His father smirked. "We are retrieving a gift from the Dark Lord there."

From the sadistic look on his father's face, Draco knew, for once, it was a gift that he would rather not have.

Remus sat in silent, paying little attention to the rows of wizards and witches sitting around him. His cold gaze set firmly on the man sitting in the middle of the room - Peter Pettigrew.

Peter was chained to a chair with two aurors standing behind him. If the little rat dared transform, it would be instant execution.

"All in favor of a lifetime imprisonment in Az-"

"No!" Peter squeaked, looking around the room with wide eyes. "I… I have information! I can give you names!"

"Fool," Moody's rough voice came from behind Remus. "They won't let him get out of this one, no matter how many names he manages to give."

"Names, you say?" A member of the Wizengamot said coldly. "Let's hear it."

"W-Walden Macnair."

"He's dead. Killed in Diagon Alley."

Peter's eyes darted around, looking more nervous by minutes. Remus averted his eyes in disgust.

"Draco Malfoy. He's in the inner circle."

"There will be no more accusing of the Malfoys. Lucius Malfoy is a respected member of the Ministry and he's cleared of all charges years ago."

"And does that say anything about his son?" Moody commented.

Albus, who was sitting next to Remus, gave Moody a warning look and the ex-auror fell silent. Remus turned his focus back to the trial.

"If you have nothing more to say, Pettigrew, we'll now pass on the verdict."

"Wait!" Peter looked truly panicked by now. "I… I have one more."

"That's your last chance."

Peter glanced around the room, his eyes met Remus' hard gaze for a brief moment before focusing back on the Wizengamot.

"H… Harry Potter."

A/N: Here's your Harry-Voldemort interaction. Like it? Hate it? You can see Harry's doubt in this chapter. Voldemort's isn't making it any better either.

Why inferi? Well, Voldemort knew Harry would never kill willingly, but at the same time he couldn't convince himself to keep a useless Death Eater around, so he had to have Harry did something. Voldemort chose to have Harry command the inferi in the end partly because it could make Harry as deadly as any other Death Eaters (thus gave Voldemort his 'reason' to keep Harry around) and it could also keep Harry safe from whatever raid he would be going (Voldemort has basically assigned an army to protect him). It's the best plan for Voldemort, but he's going to regret it.

The next chapter will most probably be after the release of book seven, since, as I said, I'm in summer school right now and don't have much opportunity to write.

Chapter 25: Doubts

Draco would never have imagined that things would turn out this way. Over Easter, the situation of the war had gone from bad to worse. The Dark Lord was rapidly gaining control over the wizarding world. People were panicking and random attacks were reported every day. It had not taken long for things to get totally out of control for both the Ministry and the Order of the Phoenix.

Draco looked out the window in his room, trying to remember how things used to be merely several months ago - when he was not involved in the war, when he didn't need to worry about being uncovered every second… when he was still at Hogwarts.

After months of preparations, the Dark Lord was now ready to bring this war to a whole new level. He was ceasing his attacks on random locations and was making plans to take over both the Ministry and Hogwarts. As part of those plans, he had decided that all Death Eater children were to stay at home and wait for further orders. No matter how bad things used to be, the thought of not being able to return to school had never occurred to Draco. Now, on the day when all students were supposed to return to Hogwarts after the holiday, Draco was surprised at how much he wished he could be on board the Hogwarts Express instead staying at home, a place he no longer felt safe in.

He had not heard much from the other Slytherins, so he had no way to determine how many of them were not returning to school. He knew that many of his fellow Slytherins had gone on their first raid in the holiday, and it seemed most of them didn't find the life of being a Death Eater anywhere close to what they had been led to believe.

But it didn't matter. Draco had been in that position before. He knew they would not back out, even if they could. They had all been taught by their families to see the chance of serving the Dark Lord as an honor, something to be proud of. They had been waiting for this moment for as long as they could remember. Draco knew that feeling of anticipation very well. He wouldn't even have thought of not joining the Dark Lord had it not been for that stubborn idiot – the same one

who was currently running circles for the Dark Lord in hopes of redeeming him.

Draco walked over to his desk and absentmindedly flipped open his potions text as his thoughts turned to the boy he had somehow forged a tentative friendship with this year. He wondered if Harry knew how deeply in trouble he was now.

While the whole world still believed that The-Boy-Who-Lived had been captured by the Death Eaters, the Ministry now suspected Harry of being a Death Eater himself, thanks to that coward Wormtail. The Minister had once again covered up the whole story, which was no wonder since the wizarding world had started to see Harry Potter as their 'Chosen One,' the one who was 'destined' to defeat the Dark Lord for them. Some of the more desperate ones had even taken Dumbledore's story that Harry was 'missing but in no danger' as evidence that their supposed savior was training in secret to fight the Dark Lord. It was all a show for the public, of course, and it certainly wouldn't protect Harry from the Ministry and the Order.

Draco's father had told him that many of those who were present in Wormtail's trial had dismissed that seemingly outrageous claim as the Dark Lord's trick to confuse their side. But for those who knew better, it was clear that the Dark Lord was not happy with Wormtail's cowardice, which inevitably suggested that there might be some truth in his words.

Despite the Prophet's claim, Peter Pettigrew was not killed by the Dementor's Kiss, he was killed by the Dark Lord's hand, literally. Draco wondered if the Dark Lord had deliberately given Wormtail that silver arm just for this purpose. Either way, one thing was clear, Harry was truly trapped now.

Draco knew he should be worried. But why was it that all he could feel now was betrayal? It was the same feeling he had when he saw Harry taking the Dark Mark just after he had convinced Draco to become a spy. That feeling had lessened after Harry had explained his intention to him, but it was still there. It was still there and it had been growing stronger as time passed. No matter what Harry's intention was, they were now working for different sides, as ironic as

it seemed. Despite his initial disgust and discomfort, Draco had found himself becoming more and more devoted to the Order. And while he didn't want to imagine Harry conforming to the Dark Lord's cause, he had heard rumors of inferi creating havocs in muggle villages and he suspected he knew who was behind them. Draco knew very well that using Dark Arts was not without its toll, and being submerged in such a dark environment could change anyone, even someone like-

His thoughts were interrupted by a sharp knock on his door.

"Dinner is ready, Draco," came his mother's voice. "Your father is coming back tonight. Don't keep him waiting."

As if Draco would want to anger his father, who was growing more and more distant from the family as he spent almost all his time preparing the complete takeover of the Ministry. Draco found that he simply didn't care anymore, not after what his father had done to him.

He closed his eyes and ignored the tinkling pain emerged from that thought. Everything had started the day when his father showed him the Dark Lord's 'gift.' Draco had not expected to see that person under such circumstance, nor had he prepared to do what his father had forced him to.

The only thing that Draco was glad about with not returning to Hogwarts was that he wouldn't have to worry about seeing Weasley there. After all, how could he face the redhead now when he knew exactly what had happened to his father? How could he insult his supposed 'enemy' when he himself had been the one who cast curse after curse at the defenseless Arthur Weasley?

It had been a practice, his father had said, to 'remedy' Draco's hesitation to torture Severus in the meeting earlier. There was nothing he could do but to follow his father's orders. He felt sick of himself for it. And he couldn't help but hate his father for what he had put him through.

Draco shook his head, sneering slightly at those sentimental thoughts. Whatever had happened to Arthur Weasley, there was only one way to change that. All Draco needed to do was to find a way to contact

Dumbledore. The old man could handle it from there then. Hopefully Weasley would live long enough for the rescue to come.

As it turned out, contacting Dumbledore had proved to be quite troublesome now that Draco was not at Hogwarts. Draco now understood why his godfather had worked at the school even though anyone could tell that he despised teaching.

After wasting much time, Draco finally managed to arrange a meeting with Dumbledore, and the man had suggested an unexpected venue. Draco wasn't sure about the idea of apparating directly into the infamous Shrieking Shack, but he figured he had little choice in that matter, and delivering his report was more important.

He was wrong.

"You knew." Draco looked up at the man sitting across from him with narrowed eyes. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Dumbledore's nodded slowly, confirming Draco's suspicion. "Severus had located Arthur a week before he was uncovered as a spy."

Draco stiffened momentarily at the mention of his godfather before his face hardened. "I didn't hear of any rescue party being sent."

Dumbledore sighed. "Severus had told me that Arthur was… beside himself. Many lives would be sacrificed in the rescue attempt and it would be too reckless for our current situation."

In another word, Dumbledore didn't think Weasley's life was worth the effort. Draco clenched his fists. He understood Dumbledore's reasoning, of course. Given the same situation, he too would have simply left Weasley to the Dark Lord. Then why was he so angry? That was just… Weasley, wasn't it?

Still, Draco found it hard to believe Dumbledore's indifference. After working as an Order member for months now, he had thought, had

expected, that Arthur Weasley would be saved once he was located. The man's mind wasn't even damaged beyond repair.

Arthur Weasley's broken form flashed before Draco's eyes. He now knew that there was no hope left for the man. Dumbledore had never planned to save him and Draco had been foolish to believe otherwise. Arthur Weasley had been sentenced to death the moment he let himself be captured. But if that was the case...

"Professor Snape might be there too, in that dungeon," said Draco quietly, looking up at the old wizard. "But you're not going to send out your men for merely two lives, are you?"

"Severus is a close friend of mine, Draco, as is Arthur," said Dumbledore, a stern look entering his eyes. "If there is any way worth trying to save them, I would do so, but there's little I can do at the moment."

"Then why did you ask me to find Professor Snape if you never intended to get him out?" Draco snapped, not bothering to contain his anger anymore.

Dumbledore looked at him through his half-moon glasses. "This I'm afraid I cannot say at the moment, but it's most important that you find him, Draco, and as soon as possible."

Draco barely refrained himself from cursing Dumbledore in frustration. Who did the old man think he was to order him around like this? Draco was tempted to just walk out of the shack and tell Dumbledore to find someone else to do his job. But at the same time he knew that his godfather would be as good as dead without the Order's help. Draco knew he alone would never be able to rescue Severus from wherever the Dark Lord was keeping him. Dumbledore had other motives, it was clear, but Draco was confident that he could handle it, being the only one who could possibly contact Severus.

"If I find him," said Draco slowly, "would that mean Professor Snape's safety then?"

Dumbledore's eyes were focused on the blocked window when he answered. "I will do what I can."

Draco gritted his teeth. He knew that was all he could get the man to promise. Suppressing his anger, he made one last remark before disapparating back home.

"Just so you know, the Dark Lord is planning to use Arthur Weasley to recruit a potential member. I don't know who his target is, but that person seems to have some close tie with the Order. Father is working on bring him to the Dark Lord as we speak."

Percy Weasley walked down the long corridor of the Ministry of Magic, nodding automatically as he passed by two wizards he knew were department heads. He had been on this level of the building before during his meetings with the Minister, but this time he was here to visit someone else. He had passed by that man's office several times before, but had never been in there, nor had he a reason to until now.

Lucius Malfoy seemed to be waiting for him. Knowing full well who the man was both in and outside the Ministry, Percy entered the office with caution. Sitting behind his desk, Malfoy calmly gestured Percy to take the seat across from him.

"Ah, what a pleasure to see you here, Mr. Weasley," said Malfoy, his tone made it clear that he did not mean a word of it.

Not wanting to spend any more time in this office, Percy pulled out a letter from his pocket and placed it on the desk. "What is the meaning of this, Mr. Malfoy?"

"I know you understand what I mean. You know more than people give you credit for, no?" said Malfoy with a smirk that was more like a sneer. "This letter is merely an… offer. This world needs to be changed and capable hands are needed to bring about that change." He looked at Percy piercingly. "But of course, to do that, one needs power, and… opportunity."

Percy tensed. So it was not his imagination. For some reason, Malfoy was trying to bring him to Voldemort's side.

"I'm not sure I understand what opportunity you are talking about."

Malfoy leaned back in his chair with an arrogant air about him. "Relax, Mr. Weasley. All I want is for you to think deeply on what is best for you… and your family."

That caught Percy's attention. "My family?" he repeated. "Is that a threat, Mr. Malfoy?"

Malfoy laughed. "Oh no, young Weasley, you misunderstood me. I am deeply sorry about what has happened to your father. I really do hope I would be able to help in any way, but unfortunately, your father's… view on certain issues limits my ability to do so."

Percy hated where this conversation was going, but the thought of his father made him stay.

"Are you saying you can bring me to my father?" he asked cautiously.

"A friend of mine might be able to help, yes."

The glint in Malfoy's eyes left no doubt in Percy's mind of who that 'friend' was.

"I'm afraid I cannot accept your offer, Mr. Malfoy," said Percy in a tight voice. "And if you'd excuse me, I think it's time for me to take my leave. I hope I haven't taken up too much of your time, all I wanted was to return this letter."

With that said, Percy turned and walked out of the office, but Malfoy's voice stopped him.

"Ah, so you are giving up the opportunity to save your father, not to mention creating a better future for your whole family? A shame, but not unexpected." Malfoy paused. "A word of advise though, young Weasley, don't get your hopes up if you are depending on Albus Dumbledore to deliver your father back to you."

Percy forced himself to walk out of the office. He could feel Malfoy's haughty gaze watching him as he left. It was not until he stepped into the elevator when he dared to breathe again.

He couldn't believe what he had just heard, what Malfoy was implying to him. If Malfoy thought for a second that Percy would betray his side, he was wrong. After what had happened to his father, how dare Malfoy even approach him? Percy shoved the whole outrageous conversation to the back of his mind. There was no point mentioning it to the others; they had enough worries as it was.

Despite his firm determination, though, Percy couldn't help thinking back on what Malfoy had said to him for the rest of the day, nor could he shake off the feeling that there might be traces of truth among all those lies.

A masked figure in Death Eater costume apparated into the clearing before the Dark Lord's manor. He raised his wand and immediately dozens of floating figures appeared before him. He suppressed a shiver and waved his wand.

"Dismissed."

His wand glowed at the same time he voiced out his order. The army of inferi obediently started to drift off to the nearby forest and disappeared from sight.

Harry closed his eyes as the now familiar surge of power flowed through him. The feeling that had been so repulsive before now seemed almost… comforting. It helped to clear his mind against all the nightmarish scenes he had seen.

Harry shook his head and started to walk back towards the manor warily. How many had died because of him tonight? How many deaths was he now responsible for?

He was exhausted by the time he reached the manor, as he had been every time he came back from a mission in the past few weeks. Only a few Death Eaters were in the hallway as Harry made his way back to his room. It seemed he was one of the first that had returned after the day's attacks. Avery, the Death Eater who had gone with Harry to the attack, had gone ahead to report their success to the Dark Lord, eager to claim the victory all by himself. Harry could care less about gaining the Dark Lord's approval, at least not in that way. In fact, Voldemort was the last person he wanted to meet at the moment.

It didn't make sense, Harry knew, considering that the Dark Lord was the sole reason behind all that he had done this year. It all pointed to one fact that Harry had been trying his hardest to avoid addressing, the same fact that many had tried to point out to him – his 'mission' was destined to fail. Or perhaps, it had already failed, fifty years ago when he left Tom Riddle behind, he was simply too stubborn to believe that now.

True, on a few occasions, Harry could glimpse the shadow of the boy he used to know in Voldemort, but was that enough?

Forcefully, Harry stopped himself from going further down that line of thoughts. Doubting now would be fatal, and he could not allow that, not when he had already gone so far.

But despite that, as if to mock him, memories of his recent raids flashed before his eyes.

His new 'job' had been easy enough. All he needed to do was to summon the inferi to wherever there was an attack. Despite what Voldemort had said, the Dark Lord didn't really seem to expect Harry to control the inferi, or rather, Voldemort didn't seem to think that he would issue any attacks. Harry had soon found out that the inferi were capable of creating havoc all by themselves. They would attack anything that was before them mindlessly, rounding up escaping muggles or dragging victims towards burning buildings. Harry could control them, yes, but only over a small range, not enough to change anything.

And that was when the doubt in his mind started to grow.

So far, he had been able to cling to the fact that even though he had switched side, he couldn't really give Voldemort any real advantage over the war. But that was not true, not anymore. In the end, he was even worse than Peter Pettigrew, wasn't he?

"Ah, if it isn't Harry Potter."

Startled at the sudden voice, Harry spun around at once, his hand reaching for his wand.

"A little jumpy, aren't we, Potter?"

Smirking at Harry was an unfamiliar woman with dark hair. She was in Death Eater's black robe, but without her mask on. The crazy look in her eyes made Harry tightened his grip on his wand.

The Death Eater looked up and down at Harry. "I see you are smarter than my dear cousin in making your choice."

"Cousin?" repeated Harry. It was then he knew who he was talking to. He narrowed his eyes. "You are Bellatrix Black."

Bellatrix feigned surprised. "So you've heard of me. Let me guess, from Sirius?"

Harry stiffened. "What do you know of Sirius?"

"What do I know of him? Oh, I know all about that blood traitor," said Bellatrix.

"Don't call him that!" Harry hissed.

"Now, now, what's with the anger, Harry?" said Bellatrix in a mocking voice. She didn't seem to be affected in the slightest. "Oh, I see, you loved him, didn't you?"

Harry gritted his teeth, his anger building within him.

"Ah, so you do!" The sickening smile never left Bellatrix's face. She leaned in closer to Harry. "Then you should be pleased to know that he is no longer fighting for the wrong cause, little Potter. It hurts me to say that it is the only way for him to see his mistake. It's a shame to think that such a blood traitor ever came from my own fam-"

Harry's wand was out before he realized what he was doing. "Shut up!" he bellowed. "You have no right to talk about him like that!"

Voldemort was listening to the report of his Death Eaters when a sudden wave of anger filled his sense.

Potter.

The first thought that came to his mind was the boy. The vast amount of anger he was feeling through their connection right now alarmed him. What was happening?

He snarled at the thought and set to strengthen his shield against the invading emotions, as he usually did. Only this time, his curiosity stopped him from doing so. It was unusual for Potter to be that angry and Voldemort decided to take a brief look at the cause of it.

Pushing aside his own share of anger at the trouble Potter was causing him, Voldemort reached for the connection he shared with the boy. There was anger, and accompanying it was no less an amount of pain. Concerned despite himself, Voldemort reached further. It didn't seem to be any physical pain, but-

The next feeling caused him to recoil. What… was that?

Voldemort could recognize that feeling. It was the same feeling he always felt on a battlefield, when the lives of those pathetic creatures ended by his hands.

Pleasure. A dark and twisted kind of pleasure.

Voldemort closed his eyes then. That… was wrong. Whatever Potter was doing now, it needed to be stopped.

Potter's mental shield had scrambled as his emotions overcame him, and Voldemort was able to see what was happening to the boy right now, and with that, a glimpse of the deepest layer of emotions that was threatening to break the boy. What he saw was… disturbing.

He abruptly pulled himself out from that mess of emotions that Potter was now feeling… and losing control of.

"You have done well," he addressed the few Death Eaters gathered in the hall. "Now leave, I shall be calling you again soon."

He ignored the mutters of gratitude from his servants as he strode out of the meeting hall. Using Legilimancy, he was able to locate the exact position of the boy. He carefully avoided diving too deep into Potter's undefended mind while maintaining a close enough connection to keep track on the boy's situation.

/What happened, Master?/ asked Nagini as she hastily followed behind him. From her concerned voice, Voldemort wondered if the snake had somehow guessed that Potter was involved.

/It would seem that something has pushed Potter far enough for him to use an unforgivable that he so hated,/ Voldemort answered simply.

He could feel Potter's anger growing stronger by seconds as he walked through the hallway of the manor. Then all of a sudden, the anger died down. For a moment, Voldemort couldn't feel a thing from the other side of the link. It was all empty.

He knew whatever had happened was over now. Potter was fine, he could tell, at least physically.

The link was all silence for seconds, then a distinct feeling of shock began to roll off from the boy.

Nearing his destination, Voldemort encountered a Death Eater running to report to him.

"M-my Lord," the Death Eater breathed, looking very uncomfortable and nervous. "It's Potter! He… Bellatrix… they-"

Voldemort didn't bother stopping. He walked past the Death Eater, ignoring him altogether. He had a good idea of what had happened. Seconds ago from Potter's eyes, he could see Bellatrix twitching on the floor screaming in pain.

He was not too surprised, therefore, when he rounded the last corner and saw the state Bellatrix was in.

A Death Eater was hovering over Bellatrix's unconscious form on the ground. He backed off hurriedly as Voldemort approached.

"How is she?" said Voldemort, looking down at the pool of blood Bellatrix was lying on.

"I-it was the Cruciatus Curse, my Lord." The Death Eater paused. "She's barely alive."

The Death Eater looked as though he wanted to run. He took a step back when Voldemort glanced from Bellatrix to focus on him. It was understandable, Voldemort supposed, he had always liked Bellatrix for her loyalty and the power she possessed. It was no secret among his followers that he had taken the time to teach the witch Dark Arts himself. At that moment, though, he was more concerned about Potter than the dark witch.

"Where is Potter?"

"He ran down the hallway over there, my Lord." The Death Eater pointed a shaky finger towards the path Voldemort knew would lead to the boy's room.

He ordered the Death Eater to take Bellatrix to a healer and turned towards the direction where Potter had disappeared to, but made no move to follow him. He wanted to check on the boy, yes, but that was all. He didn't want Potter anywhere in his sight, especially not after experiencing what he knew were Potter's suppressed emotions.

/I'm going to check on Alex, Master,/ came a hissing voice from behind him. His snake seemed to be too anxious to wait any longer.

Voldemort narrowed his eyes at the name, but didn't comment on it. Instead he chose to explain what had happened.

/The Cruciatus Curse draws off not only the anger he feels at that moment, but also the vast amount of it that he seems to have suppressed for some time. That is why he lost control of the curse./ He glanced at Nagini and added, /Tell the boy, I am sure he would want to know./

With that said, he turned around left for the own quarter, knowing that Nagini would take good care of the boy.

Harry looked up as the door to his room cracked open. Nagini slithered into his room and onto his bed. Harry sat up on his bed slowly and let the huge snake rest her head on his lap.

/How is Bellatrix Black?/ he asked quietly.

/Barely alive, it seems,/ Nagini answered casually. Then, as if sensing something wasn't right, she tilted up her head to look at Harry's face. /Are you feeling all right, Master Alex?/

Harry was about to tell her that he was fine, but the words died on his lips. Sighing, he leaned his head back on the wall and closed his eyes.

/What is happening to me, Nagini?/ he asked softly.

/Master Alex?/

After spending so much time with the serpent for the past month, Harry could tell that Nagini was concerned. He shouldn't have made her that worried; it was his own problem after all.

/You know you can trust me with anything, master Alex,/ said Nagini, slithering closer to him.

Harry smiled slightly despite himself. Nagini was getting to know him too well, and she was starting to become too similar to Mrs. Weasley at times. At the thought of the Weasleys, Harry's smile fell. He stared silently at the ceiling for a moment before speaking quietly.

/I'm not sure about anything anymore,/ he said. /It seemed to be the right thing to do then, but now… now I just feel like a traitor… and a murderer./ He turned to the snake listening to him. /But you don't understand what I mean, do you? I… I just want him to stop. But… all I can think of now is how I've become more… like him./

/You mean Master… don't you?/ Nagini asked in a gentle tone.

Harry nodded. He stared at his hands. / I felt so angry just now. And it felt so… good to hear Bellatrix scream, to know that I'm causing her pain./ He shook his head. /What's wrong with me?/

/Master said you are drawing on your suppressed anger. That's why it became so strong that it went out of control./

Harry turned to her sharply at that. /The Dark Lord knew about it?/

/Yes, he felt something wrong in the meeting hall. He saw what happened and told me to check on you./

Harry clenched his fists, then released them. He felt suddenly exhausted, more so than when he returned from the raid.

/I don't know what to do anymore, Nagini,/ he said finally. /I feel so useless… and I hate it./ He drew his knees up to his chest and rested his head on them. /I hate it./

Back in his own quarters, Voldemort found himself unable to concentrate on his work at all, and once again, it was because of that boy.

It had been a mistake to reach that far into Potter's mind and Voldemort admitted that he was not prepared for it. For a brief second just then, he was deep within Potter's mind and was confronted with the boy's deepest feelings; feelings he suspected that even Potter himself was not aware of.

Guilt. Voldemort had sensed that from Potter since the day the boy had come to join him. But now accompanying that guilt was an overwhelming sense of helplessness.

Voldemort had no idea that Potter was feeling this… trapped. But considering what the boy had been doing, it was probably not surprising.

Potter had run himself into a corner, without anyway out. All the ways were blocked from him, one by one. He blamed that on his own recklessness… and his own stupidity.

Voldemort tried not to let Potter's feelings affect him and focused on the situation at hand. The Cruciatus Curse.

It seemed that Potter had been suppressing his anger and frustration for some time… and once the ram of his emotions came lose, coupled with the use of dark magic, it was no surprise that he had lost control of his own magic.

He would have loved to tell Dumbledore what his golden boy had done, but not this time.

Voldemort could still recall the moment when he was in Potter's mind, surrounded by all kinds of dark emotions. It was not what he had expected to see at all. The boy's mind was… dark, in his own way, as if all the 'light' had been chased away by all the boy had experienced in the past few months.

It was the same as the time when Potter first called him 'Lord'. It was all wrong. It was not something that the stubborn boy should do to himself, not for anything… not for him.

His train of thoughts stopped at that point, as it had every time when Potter came to his mind. But unlike the other times, he couldn't bring himself to feel annoyed at Potter for causing all his problems, nor could he simply push away his disturbing thoughts and go back to his work. Instead, Voldemort found himself walking over to his bedside drawer.

He found what he was looking for quickly. Inside that drawer, abandoned on the side, was a silver necklace with a glowing crystal attached to it. It looked the same as it had been when he tore it from Potter's neck that day. The same, in fact, as it had been more than fifty years ago.

Voldemort reached for the necklace, only to withdraw his hand the moment he touched the glowing crystal. The crystal was red hot, as if the magic in it was boiling in anger.

Voldemort closed the drawer after a last glance at the brightly glowing crystal. He didn't know what had made him check on it now. Despite how powerful he might have been back then, he had still been a child. The existence of that necklace was the proof of how childish he had once been. Then why was he bothered by the fact that the crystal had repelled him, even more vigorously than before?

An answer was starting to form at the back of his mind, but he refused to search deeply for it. Perhaps he knew then, it was an answer that he would never be ready for.

A/N: A rather depressing chapter, no? Things are coming together now. We'll see Snape again in the next chapter. He's finally going to find out what the son of James Potter has done.

On a side note, I've posted a post-HBP one shot The Road to Hell. It is, once again, about Tom Riddle. It's not related to this fic in any sense, but if you're interested, you can find it in my profile.

Chapter 26: A Delicate Balance

Draco carefully kept his frustration at bay as he wandered outside the Dark Lord's manor. His father had been kept behind by the Dark Lord after the meeting, leaving him alone for some time.

Not nearly enough time though. His father would come searching for him as soon as he finished his meeting with the Dark Lord, so he had no choice but to remain in a place where he could be found, and that meant he couldn't go sneaking off into the dungeon.

Draco clenched his fists. It had been weeks since he had begun his search for Severus, but so far he had only managed to sneak into that dungeon three brief times. Whenever he had a chance to go to the Dark Lord's manor, there was almost always someone there to accompany him, be it his father or some other Death Eaters, and that made things very difficult.

He was almost certain that Severus was locked somewhere deep inside that dungeon, but with the rate he was going, it was simply impossible for him to locate a single person in that maze-like hell.

And hell it was. The mere thought of that place made him feel nauseous. A mere fifteen-minute visit and Draco had already been thoroughly sickened by what he had seen. He suppressed a shudder at the thought of his godfather being one of those prisoners, reduced to a state that was barely recognizable.

In a way, Draco had always been close to Severus. He had been, and still was, reluctant to show any weaknesses in front of his father, whom he had wanted nothing more than to impress. So instead of his own father, Draco had turned to Severus for help, even when he was still a child. At some point in the past, issues about allegiances had made Draco wary of his godfather, but it had all been resolved now. To Draco, it had been a great relief and encouragement to learn that Severus was actually a spy for the Order. In fact, he and Severus had been closer than ever in the past few months. Now that Severus needed his help, Draco refused to give up until every sign pointed to that dreadful truth. He no longer cared if Dumbledore was truly

serious about rescuing Severus; all he knew was that his godfather's life now depended solely on him.

Shaking his head to clear his mind, Draco found that he had wandered to the far side of the manor, and he was now dangerously close to that dreadful forest. Casting a warming charm on himself against the unnatural coldness that seemed to be emerging from the forest itself, Draco hastily made his way back to the manor.

He had only taken a few steps when he caught movement from the corner of his eyes. The temperature of the place seemed to have dropped even lower, telling him that whatever he had encountered, it was not normal Death Eaters.

He turned around cautiously and took in a sharp breath at the sight of four inferi advancing towards him from the nearby forest. He pulled out his wand at once, ready to banish the creatures if they came any closer.

But that was not necessary. All of a sudden, the inferi all stopped in their movement. As if being controlled by some unseen force, the inferi turned around as one and slowly drifted back into the forest.

Moments later, from the spot where the inferi had disappeared to, a hooded figure emerged from the forest. Draco tensed. He relaxed slightly once he recognized who that was, but didn't pocket his wand.

"So it was really you who controlled them." His gaze shifted from the person's Death Eater attire to his hooded face. "Potter."

Harry Potter, the person who had made Draco's life even more complicated than it already had been; the person who had then left him alone to deal with the mess.

Harry winced at the unforgiving tone. "Draco-"

Draco sneered. It was the first time since the raid in Diagon Alley that he saw Harry outside of Death Eater meetings. The feeling of betrayal was returning in full force, banishing his previous fright at

seeing the inferi. He suppressed his urge to yell at Harry and forced himself to find a secure place first.

Harry waved his hand towards the direction where he had come from. "I know a spot in there that should be safe."

Draco couldn't believe that Harry was actually suggesting this. "For you, perhaps," he said. "I don't care if they are your friends now," sarcasm and bitterness slipped into his tone, "if you expect me to go anywhere near those inferi, you are clearly insane, Potter." He turned around and nodded towards a shadowed area near the side-wall of the manor. "Over there."

Once hidden under the shadow, Draco raised his wand and cast several security charms over the area, including one that Severus had taught him. Satisfied with his work, he turned back to Harry, who had pulled back his hood and was looking at him wearily.

There was so much Draco wanted to say. In the end, he settled with the one question that he had wanted to ask for a long time.

"Do you have any idea what you are doing?"

Harry sighed. "I've already told you-"

"Yes, you've told me your 'plan' before," said Draco sardonically. "A plan that is clearly not working."

Harry didn't even retort, and that angered Draco even more.

"Why the hell are you still helping him? You know very well that it is not going anywhere. You are merely strengthening his force!"

Harry winced. He averted his eyes but still stubbornly remained silent.

Draco had had enough. "Is that it, Potter?" he said in a deadly voice. "So you are just going to play loyal puppet to the Dark Lord?"

Harry clenched his fists. "I don't know, Draco. I don't know what I'm supposed to do!" He looked up at Draco with angry eyes. "Just leave me alone."

Draco gritted his teeth and returned Harry's intense gaze with equal animosity. "Leave you alone?" he hissed. "Potter, you happen to know one my biggest secrets, one that could kill me! I'm afraid I can't 'leave you alone' until you feel like betraying me."

Harry stiffened, his eyes widened. He opened his mouth to say something, but stopped himself. Finally he sighed and stared at Draco with an unreadable expression.

"I would never betray you, Draco," said Harry. "But you wouldn't believe me, would you?"

Draco nodded. "How can I trust you when you are doing whatever the Dark Lord asks of you?"

Never let your own feelings blind you from seeing the obvious truth, especially when your own life is concerned. It seemed that extra year in the past had really given Harry insight at a Slytherin's mindset.

"What do you want me to do then?" said Harry tiredly. "If you want, I can give you an Unbreakable Vow."

Draco was surprised that Harry would actually suggest that. He shook his head. "We would need someone else to be the bonder, that would not work."

Harry closed his eyes. "Then what do you want me to do?"

Draco hesitated. He honestly didn't know what exactly he wanted from Harry. There was no way to prove that he was being honest - none that Draco would truly believe, anyway.

He had, of course, considered several other options. A simple obliviate would probably work, or he could use some other more permanent and harmful means to ensure that Harry would not be able to tell anyone. But if they were used, then it would sever the…

friendship, as tentative as it had become lately, that had formed between the two of them this year. That was probably why he had delayed trying to get a hold of Harry until this chance meeting. In a way, against his better judgment, he knew, and believed, that he had nothing to fear from Harry, at least for now.

"You know very well what you should do." Draco couldn't believe he was the one that would end up saying this. "Leave the Dark Lord, Potter."

A torn look crossed Harry's eyes. His shoulder slumped. "I can't Draco. I have nowhere else to go."

"Then leave," Draco countered. "Leave this war altogether. At least you won't be causing any deaths then."

The statement hit the point as Harry flinched.

"I need more time, Draco," said Harry quietly after a long pause. "I'll figure out something, I promise."

It was odd to see Harry looking so… defeated. "You are hopeless, Harry," Draco muttered.

Should the situation be required in the future, when it became apparent that Harry had fallen so far that his own judgment could no longer be trusted, Draco knew he would do whatever was needed to ensure his own safety. But for now, he would wait.

Draco snorted inwardly. This was not how he had anticipated this conversation to go at all and he mentally blamed Harry for that. Harry's dangerously optimistic view towards his so-called friends must have somehow rubbed off on him

It was like planting a deadly poison inside his own body, never knowing when it would finally kill him. Letting someone who was so close to the Dark Lord to carry his fatal secret was a great risk, one that Draco would never have imagined himself taking. He could only hope that the idiotic Gryffindor-Slytherin would be able to withstand the Dark Lord's influence, if not leave it altogether.

Draco was about to end the warding spells when an idea hit him. Harry was now living in the manor; it should be incredibly easy for him to explore the dungeon. If Draco could convince Harry to help him search for Severus…

But would Harry help? Draco had no way to know. But if he could trust Harry with his deadly secret, then there was really nothing to lose by letting Harry into his mission as well.

Harry walked along the dark corridor. He could feel the presence of the dementors surrounding him, but none of them had come near him so far. He suspected it had something to do with his Dark Mark, which often tingled whenever he saw a dementor in sight.

Draco had been right when he called this dungeon a maze. It was not that large, but its structure was messy and complicated. It had been four days since Harry had started exploring said maze, but there was still no sign of Snape.

The conversation with Draco had weighed heavily on him. Ever since the incident with Bellatrix, Harry had been in a state of constant confusion. He didn't know what to do anymore. All things considered, Harry knew there was only one end for him, however he chose. But what of the others?

'Leave this war altogether. At least you won't be causing any deaths then.'

Draco's words kept coming back to him, pressing him hard to decide on his next move. For a long time, Harry had been trying to put off making that decision, even though he knew how irresponsible that was.

And now, as he continued his search for Snape, Harry felt as though he was digging an even deeper hole for himself. He might not have agreed with what Voldemort had done, but so far, he had not done anything secretly in the back to betray the Dark Lord. Harry had been

careful in keeping himself from crossing that particular line, and he wanted to keep it that way, for now, at least.

Harry had refused what Draco had asked him to do at first, but Draco's genuine concern for his godfather had convinced him at last. Still, all he was going to do was to find out Snape's location and condition. The rest would be up to Draco.

Months ago, Harry would have despised this kind of indifference, but now… he could barely feel anything at all. It was this kind of comparison that would always send a chill down Harry's spine.

Steeling himself, Harry went on with his search. He passed through cell after cell, trying his hardest to ignore the pleading and cursing from the prisoners. He was beginning to wonder if Snape was really in there when he came by an iron door that resembled the one that led down to the dungeon from the forest. Knowing what he had to do, Harry placed his palm onto the door. His Dark Mark burned lightly and the door clicked open.

Staring down the steep stairs before him, Harry had a feeling that he might have finally found Snape.

It was an odd feeling. For a whole year, he had been trying to evade Snape's suspicion, but now he was actually trying to find him. Harry couldn't even begin to imagine what Snape's reaction would be when he saw him.

Taking in a deep breath, Harry pulled his hood lower over his face and ventured deeper into dungeon.

Severus stayed unmoved at the back of his cell as the coldness surrounding him slowly dispersed. The dementors were leaving, and that could only mean one thing – the Dark Lord was about to continue his questioning.

He tiredly checked over his Occlumency shield, making sure that it was strong enough to withstand the Dark Lord's attack. How much

longer could he last, he wondered? But there was no point questioning, he knew he would fight for as long as he could until whatever end awaited him.

All the dementors had left by now and Severus could hear faint footsteps echoing from the dark corridor leading to his cell. Abruptly, the footsteps stopped and a sharp gasp reached his ears.

He sat up straighter against the wall. Whoever his visitor was, it was not the Dark Lord. He glanced over to the direction where the sound had come from and narrowed his eyes. He could vaguely make out a shape hidden in the shadow.

A Death Eater, perhaps? Severus had long given up hope that any rescue was to come. He knew what kind of man Albus Dumbledore was. The only reason that Dumbledore might have to get him out was, ironically, the same reason that had been keeping him alive up to this very moment – the prophecy. Dumbledore had made a grave mistake when he told Severus that cursed prophecy in hope to convince him of that brat's importance, or probably as a way to secure Severus' loyalty. Either way Severus didn't care; he was doing this for one and only one person.

As the Death Eater, or whoever it was, finally stepped forward and stopped right before his cell, Severus wondered if the Dark Lord had finally decided to end his life without getting the prophecy. The dungeon was poorly lit, but his visitor stood close enough for Severus to take a good look at him.

There wasn't much to tell about his visitor's identity, with his hood covering most of his face. It was not any Death Eaters that Severus personally knew well, though he did seem familiar. For some reason, though, this sense of familiarity gave Severus a strange foreboding feeling.

"The Dark Lord sent you, didn't he?" asked Severus cautiously, testing his visitor's reaction.

To his surprise, his visitor shook his head. What kind of game was this? Severus narrowed his eyes, trying to connect the hooded figure before him with anyone he had seen within the Dark Lord's rank.

Interestingly enough, Severus could see that his intense gaze was making his visitor uneasy. Seconds of tensed moment later, his visitor let out a soft sigh and, hesitantly, reached up to push back his hood. It was the last person Severus had expected to see.

Severus' tired mind quickly tried to make sense of what he was seeing. For a brief second, he even wondered if he was still being trapped inside an illusion created by the dementors. That was, of course, not possible for someone as skilled in Occlumency as himself. Then why? What else could explain the sudden appearance of this one person?

"Potter?"

The person who looked like Potter nodded his head slightly.

It must be the Dark Lord's trick, Severus concluded, but what was the point of it? Did the Dark Lord believe he would reveal the prophecy to this impostor? But the Dark Lord surly knew him enough to know that he would never fall for something as obvious as this.

Even under the dim light, Severus could tell that 'Potter' looked very uncomfortable with his current situation. Those signs of nervousness, at least, reminded him of that brat. But why would someone sent by the Dark Lord look so uncertain in front of him? Was that an act? In his current state, Severus was too tired to play the Dark Lord's little game.

"What does the Dark Lord want?"

'Potter' blinked, as if he was not expecting that question. "What? He-" Then understanding seemed to have dawned on the boy. "You think I'm not-" He looked even more uneasy. "This is not a trap or anything to set you up. If you want, you… you could ask me something that only I know."

Severus narrowed his eyes. What was it now? He decided to play along.

"Tell me then, Potter," he stressed the name, "what potion did you brew in our last Remedial Potions class?"

The answer came immediately. "I didn't brew any potions," answered 'Potter' firmly. "We were having Occlumency lessons."

No one but Potter should know that, unless the brat had told someone else, which was more than likely.

"And what happened in that last lesson?" Severus didn't want to bring that up, but it was unlikely that the imposter would know about that incident.

The boy thought for a moment before replying carefully, "I accidentally entered your mind… and saw one of your memories. It was... about you, my father and Sirius. You brought me to Dumbledore afterwards and told him that I know Legilimency."

Hearing that incident again, as vaguely as it had been described, brought up the familiar loathing Severus felt towards the boy. It also vanquished most of his doubt concerning the identity of the person standing before him. But the question of why remained.

"If you are indeed Potter," he said finally, "then what are you doing here, deep inside the Dark Lord's dungeon?

He observed the boy closely, still unable to believe what his mind told him was true. Potter was dressed in plain black robe with his hood drawn back. He looked pale and tired, as if he had not slept for a while.

"I…" Potter sighed. "I better show you." He hesitated, then he lifted his head and met Severus' eyes. Something about that pair of green eyes seemed different from what Severus' remembered. Putting that thought away for now, Severus focused and let himself into the memory that Potter was projecting to him.

"The Dark Lord should be keeping him deep inside that place for questioning," said Draco.

"Questioning?" asked Potter.

Draco nodded. "No one knows what the Dark Lord wants from Severus, my guess is that it concerns the Order." He paused and stared at Potter intensely. "So? All I need to know is his location. I can't do that myself, not with my father watching me so closely."

Potter grimaced. "I can't, Draco."

Draco didn't seem surprise. He merely shook his head. "You are not the same Harry Potter that I knew this year anymore. Afraid to betray your dear Master, aren't you, Potter?"

The memory ended abruptly, giving Severus that impression that Potter had shown him more than he had intended to. There was no mistake that the person in front of him was indeed Potter now. As much as his magic was inhibited, Severus could at least tell that the memory just now had been personal and not meddled with.

"Draco wanted me to find out where you are. The Order should be sending their rescue soon," said Potter tightly.

"But as I recall, Potter, you refused," said Severus. He wasn't bothered by that in the slightest, having experienced the same situation more than enough time. No, it was the reason of that refusal that he was concerned about. The fact that his godson seemed to have known quite a lot about Potter aside, Draco had also mentioned something about Potter's… Master.

There was only one obvious explanation, the same one that could explain Potter's appearance at the Dark Lord's lair.

Potter was about to say something, but Severus was not interested in hearing what the brat had to say to defend himself.

"Show me your arm, Potter," he demanded.

Potter tensed. The fact that the boy had not responded in outright indignation at the implication spoke as much as the confirmation itself. Potter sighed as he slowly rolled up his left sleeve.

Severus closed his eyes briefly. There were some oddly shaped scars on the boy's arm, but that black tattoo still stood out glaringly. As he stared back at the Dark Mark, a cold sensation filled him – rage.

"Explain yourself!"

Potter rolled back his sleeve. His eyes were fixed on his covered arm when he replied, "I… I have my own reasons." He shook his head and glanced up at Severus. "Look, it's not about me. What's important is to get you-"

Moving faster than he had had since his capture, Severus pushed himself towards the bar and reached out to grab the boy's collar, pulling him close. "Stop playing around and answer my question, Potter," he hissed dangerously into the boy's ear.

Something had finally drawn on Severus upon this… revelation. The newest member of the Dark Lord's inner circle, the Death Eater that he had been unable to identify, the Slytherins' change in attitude towards Potter and Draco's evasion to any questions concerning the boy, they all made sense now.

It all pointed to one conclusion – Potter was loyal to the Dark Lord.

Severus tightened his grip on the boy. "I had thought your dead father was selfish to the extreme, but I see his son has exceeded even that. Harry Potter would probably see his parents' sacrifice as a convenient way to gain fame and power."

Potter violently shoved him off and stepped back from the bared door. "That's not true!" he shouted. "You don't underst-"

"No, it is you who don't understand, Potter." Severus stared straight into the boy's glare. "Your mother could have lived, but she chose to protect you. She chose death so that you could have a life." He glanced at Potter's covered left arm. "Do you know what that tattoo

means, Potter? It means you have just sold your life to the one person that destroyed your family."

Potter took a step back. "Stop that!"

Staring into that pair of emerald eyes, Severus now understood why those eyes had disturbed him moments ago. Not only because they were Lily's eyes, but also because of what he saw in them.

"Using Dark Arts too, aren't we, Potter?" he said in a low voice. "And you are letting that power control you, which shouldn't be a surprise at all."

Potter flinched, causing Severus to wonder if something had already happened. Potter gritted his teeth, then, to Severus' surprise and dismay, the arrogant brat decided to run away from it all.

Severus clenched the bars tightly as Potter disappeared from his sight. Taking in a sharp breath to calm himself, he called out into the darkness, knowing that Potter could still hear him. "The Dark Lord never trusts, Potter. He would kill even his right-hand man should that person proves to be a threat to him." The sound of Potter's footsteps ceased. Severus went on, "He is after the prophecy. For now, my Occlumency could still hold, but it would not be forever. One way or another, he would get what he wants. I suggest you to rethink your decision before then."

There was a long moment of silence. Then Severus could hear the sound of door opening and closing, indicating that Potter had left. He sat back at the back of his cell and shut his eyes, resting his head in his hands.

I've failed you, Lily.

He had never even considered the possibility of this happening. How could it be? That self-righteous, arrogant boy, the son of James Potter, how could he have found his way into this dark and twisted world that no one from the 'light' families even knew existed?

The familiar cold presence was drifting back. Severus knew then, as the dementors started to close in on him, holding on was going to be much harder from now on.

"Sir, how is the search for my father going?"

"I'm afraid we don't have much good news on that yet, my boy."

He clenched his fists. "Is there still any hope?"

The pair of unreadable blue eyes looked back at him sadly. "It has been nearly four months, Percy, all we can do now is wait."

Percy shook his head and forced himself to concentrate back on the pile of documents before him. No matter what he did, the conversation he had had with Dumbledore just two days ago kept playing back in his mind.

Sighing, he put down his quill and rubbed his temple. What Malfoy had said to him that day was still bothering him, even though he kept telling himself to forget the whole incident.

"The offer still stands, but I can't guarantee how long it would be. And remember that the longer we wait, the more danger your father would be in."

Percy closed his eyes. He knew very well what he should do, of course. Or in this case, what he shouldn't do. But whenever he thought of his father, whenever he saw his mother forcing that strained smile on her face, he would inevitably think back on Malfoy's 'offer', and he felt disgusted at himself for that.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, Percy realized that it was already eleven at night. He had once again lost track of time with his work. Gathering a small pile of documents that he would bring home to work on tonight, Percy hastily packed his belongings and left his office.

Months ago, the Ministry would have been near empty at night. But that situation had changed completely ever since You-Know-Who had made his return known. The place had become almost like a different kind of battlefield with Ministry officers working for days and nights without rest. Percy himself had no problem working late into the night, but he dared not stayed too late now, mainly because he knew his mother would not sleep until she saw with her own eyes that he had come back home from work safely. Percy was a little annoyed with his mother's new protectiveness, but he was even more worried that she was stressing herself too much over his father's situation. As if the situation was not bad enough, Percy now felt himself responsible for knowingly giving up a possible opportunity to save his father.

Lost in his thoughts, Percy paid little attention to the people he was passing by as he walked towards one of the apparition points. Spinning on the spot, he arrived at the now familiar street within seconds.

His family had been living in Grimauld Place since Christmas. Not the most comfortable place in the world, and it was so heavily warded that no one could apparate or floo directly into it. It was quite inconvenient, but at least it was safe and it made working for the Order much easier. Still, Percy found himself longing to return to the Burrow - the only place, he now realized, that he truly called home.

Once his eyes had gotten used to the dark environment, Percy cautiously walked down the street. He had taken to apparating to a nearby street and taking the long route back to Headquarters. Not that anyone could enter the place because of the Fidelius Charm, but the Order would like to keep the exact location of their Headquarters secret for as long as possible.

Out of habit, he looked around to check that he was not being followed. Ever since his meeting with Lucius Malfoy, he had felt as though he was being constantly watched. Of course, he might only have been parano-

He stopped in his tracks abruptly as a cold feeling spread through him. Someone was watching him, and that feeling was stronger than ever this time. Even as he reached for his wand, he could feel

whoever it was closing in on him. He turned to his left, preparing to attack as he did so.

His breath caught as he saw the distinct white mask on the face of the figure approaching him. He raised his wand, but the Death Eater before him merely stared back at him with a mocking smirk on his lips.

Too late. Percy froze as two more Death Eaters stepped out from the shadow behind him, both had their wands trained on him.

Before Percy could move, a jet of red light had hit him, disarming him instantly. He could only watch as the first Death Eater raised his own wand with a sadistic look on his face.

"Imperio."

A/N: So, Percy is now in trouble, and Sev finally finds out the truth. Harry is still in doubt, but the next chapter will change that. Expect to see more Harry-Voldemort interaction soon.

By the way, I may need a new beta for this story, anyone interested?

Chapter 27: Decisions

When Percy came to, he was standing in an unfamiliar place, but he had no recollection of how he had gotten here. He felt light-headed, as though he had just woken up from a long, pleasant dream. Looking up, he saw a man standing a short distance before him with a haughty smirk on his face, as if he was taunting him. Percy's mind supplied the name of the man seconds later. Lucius Malfoy.

That name struck him out from his daze and everything came back to him. His blood turned cold as the memories of what had transpired the night before rushed back in his mind.

He had been assaulted by Death Eaters and placed under the Imperious curse… Although Percy had been drowsy at that time, he recalled a voice chiming instructions at him through the haze in his mind, telling him what to do. Only now did it sink in. It had been Lucius Malfoy's voice. He vaguely remembered working in his office, talking to the Minister and…

Merlin, what else had he done?

A voice, frosty and cutting, sliced cleanly through the momentary silence, sending an icy chill down his spine. He knew that voice…

Having little success in calming himself, Percy slowly looked past Malfoy towards the other occupant in the room with growing dread. Deep inside him, he already knew who that was, but he still couldn't help gasping and taking a step back.

It was him, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, the wizard that had started this whole war.

The Dark Lord was staring straight at him. As if sensing his fear, a twisted kind of amusement flashed across the pair of crimson eyes. Without looking away from Percy, the Dark Lord waved dismissively at Malfoy.

"You know what to do, Lucius."

Next to Percy, Malfoy nodded in understanding. "Yes, my Lord."

Malfoy left the room, but not before bowing deeply to the Dark Lord.

Percy's amazement allowed him to look away from You-Know-Who and stare after Malfoy. It was hard to believe that someone as arrogant as Lucius Malfoy could be ordered around like this.

"Power, young Weasley, that is all it is about."

Percy focused back to the Dark Lord. The realization that he was now alone with the darkest wizard in centuries slowly started to sink in, almost as if his senses had been previously numbed by shock. Was this some kind of nightmare? What was going on?

"Such power could be yours too, should you choose."

"What-" It took a while for the message to sink in. Percy's face froze at what the Dark Lord was implying. Was that why he was here? He was here, stuck in this nightmare, because the Dark Lord wanted to recruit him? He had thought it was over when he turned down Malfoy's offer, but he should have known that anything related to the Dark Lord would not end that easily. But why would He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, of all people, be that interested in him? Perhaps fear had made him slow, but Percy couldn't understand.

"I know all about you, Percy. I know what you want," said the Dark Lord. "You desire respect and recognition, do you not? Because of these –ah, powerful incentives, you left your family and went to work for the Ministry. But in the end, you were disappointed, no?" He leaned forward, his eyes boring into Percy's. "You want others to see you for who you are, but no matter how hard you try, no one was willing to pay any attention to you. You have ideas of your own about how things should be done, but all you have been asked to do are trivial matters. Does that not make you feel that you are wasting away there? Head Boy and top student in your year, and look what you are doing now."

Percy clenched his fists. "That's not true," he said through gritted teeth.

"Is it not?" countered the Dark Lord easily. "Can you honestly deny what I've said? Do you really feel nothing when you are forced to work for those that are inferior to you in everything but title?"

Percy realized in disgust that he wasn't able to retort right away. He knew he shouldn't even have to consider what the Dark Lord was saying. The answer was clear… wasn't it?

But try as he might, his heart could not deny what the Dark Lord had said. All through his life, Percy had always known a rule: that rewards came with effort. And so he had worked long and hard to get his current position in the Ministry, but even so, he had never been given any opportunity to make decisions. It had all been about following orders. And after the whole fiasco about hiding the Dark Lord's return from the public, Percy had become thoroughly disappointed with all the mistakes and wrong decisions that their government had made. Without a doubt, the political situation had to be changed. Yet Percy admitted to himself that with his current position, there was nothing he could do to make a difference.

"With power comes control. Being in the Ministry, you must have seen how that works, haven't you?" the Dark Lord pressed harder. "Join me, Percy, and you would have the kind of power and respect that you so desired."

That kind of power… was it really what he wanted?

For a second Percy's resolve, already crumbling, nearly faltered under the Dark Lord's persuasive words, but at that same moment memories of the recent months flashed across his mind - going home after months of living by himself, his Mum hugging him with tears on her face, the twins playing their 'homecoming' pranks on him...

His family. The family that he had almost lost in his own foolishness. The family that was infinitely more precious to him than anything power could offer.

Percy swore that he would not repeat his mistakes. Whatever the Dark Lord might be giving him, Percy knew now, it was not what he

wanted. Taking in a deep breath to boost his determination, he lifted his head. And for the first time, Percy was able to look at the Dark Lord as one wizard to another.

"That's not true," he said firmly.

Strangely, that realization had helped calm him down. It cleared away the foggy doubts that he had been feeling since Malfoy- no, since after he had left his family last year. He couldn't pinpoint what it was that he truly wanted, but some inner feeling told him that whatever it was, he already had it. And he had had it for a long time.

The Dark Lord's expression suddenly changed, and with a simple narrowing of his eyes, what was persuasive –almost charming- turned fierce and angry. At that moment, under those piercing red eyes, Percy suddenly knew with painful clarity that with the way things were going, there was simply no way he could live through this meeting. He was going to die, young as he was. That fact caused a sickening feeling in his stomach.

Gritting his teeth, Percy forced those thoughts away. If he was going to die, he would die like a true Gryffindor, as a Weasley should.

Feeling more secure with himself than he had had for years, Percy knew his voice would not shake, nor would it come out weak. He told the Dark Lord calmly, "I will never join you, not now, not ever…Voldemort."

"Crucio!"

The curse hit him in the chest, sending waves of agony through his body. Percy screamed and fell on his knees as he felt as if a fire had been lit inside of him, and it was now relentlessly burning his flesh. He had never imagined this kind of pain could even exist.

After what seemed like ages, the pain stopped all of a sudden. One moment it was all fire and agony, and the next moment there was only a soothing numbness. Percy gasped for breath. He attempted to push himself up, but failed miserably.

Voldemort stared down at him in contempt. "What do you think you can accomplish by that, Weasley? In the end, you would die, nothing would be changed, and no one would ever remember how bravely you've tried to resist me."

Ignoring the blood that soaked his robe, Percy forced himself to stand up. He pulled out his wand with his shaky hand.

"No, you're wrong." His breathing was strained, but his voice was steady.

He couldn't say he did not fear death, but he knew that things would not be as Voldemort had said. Whatever was going to happen, he would be remembered, by those that were worth risking his life again and again to protect and to fight for. His didn't need supreme power, because it was his family and his friends that, ultimately, defined his own existence.

"I see Dumbledore's deceptive lies about 'love' still have their influences," said Voldemort, and it was frightening how he could make every word sound like a snarl. "You aren't an idiot, Weasley. Surely you are smart enough to see past those empty promises?"

"Just because you don't understand doesn't mean they are lies, Voldemort," said Percy.

Voldemort's eyes flashed with a merciless glint, causing Percy to shiver despite himself. He steeled himself and held his wand close. This nightmare was not over yet. More was to come before the end of the night.

/Master Alex, are you sure you're all right?/

/I'm fine, Nagini,/ Harry glanced down at the huge snake resting her head on his lap. /We should head back now, it's getting dark./

Nagini slithered off his lap and back on the ground, her gaze never leaving Harry as he stood up from under a tree and brushed specks of dirt off his robe.

/I'm fine, don't worry,/ Harry repeated with a small smile.

Out of habit, he took one last look around the small clearing that had become his hiding place before making his way out of the forest.

/But you look really upset, and you won't tell me why,/ Nagini grumbled darkly as she followed, causing Harry to chuckle in both amusement and affection.

Harry made his way through the now familiar forest swiftly. The Inferi lurking somewhere in there still gave him chills at times, but for better or for worse, he had become far more comfortable in their presence than he was months ago. And lately, he had found himself spending more time outdoors in the forest with those unfeeling creatures than staying back in the manor.

Raising his wand, Harry steered away the Inferius that had been blocking his way. It was almost an afterthought that made him grimace at how casually he had just done that.

"Using the Dark Arts too, aren't we, Potter?"

After his meeting with Snape, Harry had gone back to the manor's library to look up more details concerning the spells that he had been using to control the Inferi. While they were nowhere as dark as the spells used to create them, those controlling spells were still considered as serious and advanced Dark Arts.

Thinking back, Harry found that though he had struggled initially, he had managed to grasp the usage of those spells fairly quickly after a while. By now, he could use them almost as easily as any normal charm. Was it because of the necessity of the situation? Or was it because of the general environment of the Dark Lord's lair? Either way, Harry didn't want to consider how much his own emotions had contributed to this rather accelerated learning process.

As he emerged from the forest, Harry couldn't stop himself from glancing towards the direction of the dungeon's entrance. He wondered how Snape was doing. The Potions Master's tortured form had never quite left his mind since their meeting, and much as he disliked the man, it was disturbing to see his former teacher in such a state.

Harry didn't think about what he had expected when he decided to go searching for Snape at Draco's request. Harry had known that the moment he revealed his identity to Snape, it was impossible not to have told the man what he had done. It shouldn't have been that hard since they had always loathed each other, but that was not true. Snape's words had hit him harder than even Draco's.

Harry wondered how the rescuing process was going. It had been nearly a week since he had passed the information of Snape's whereabouts to Draco. He had not seen Draco since then, but the blonde seemed to be planning something. Harry felt guilty about leaving Snape behind when he knew exactly what kind of danger the older man was in. Should he perhaps do more? But if he did, it would mean betrayal, and the Dark Lord was known for his ferocious punishment of traitors. Did he want to be marked as a traitor by both sides? Whichever way Harry looked at the situation, there was simply no way out. He sighed, frustrated by his own indecisiveness.

Without realizing it, he had reached the manor. Walking through the entrance, he passed by the door to the meeting hall on his way back to his room. He could hear Voldemort's voice coming from inside. Was it a meeting? Or was it… an interrogation of some new captives?

Harry shivered at the memories of the several Death Eater meetings that had been held in that room. Shaking his head, he carefully kept away from the door and climbed up the stairs that led to his room, unaware of what was happening behind that very door at that moment.

"Still holding onto your fragile beliefs, I see."

Percy glared back at Voldemort, refusing to yield under the other's stare. He clenched his wand at his side. What he needed was an opening, a distraction. No matter how this was going to end, he refused to go down without a fight.

"You seem distinctly different from how your father perceived you," Voldemort paused as Percy froze. "Yes, your father. As loyal to the old fool as he might be, your father does know some interesting information."

A side door cracked open. Percy whirled around. His breath caught as he recognized the unconscious figure being levitated into the room.

"Dad!"

Lucius Malfoy stepped into the hall and released the levitation spell abruptly, dropping Percy's father on the ground roughly.

"Ennervate!"

Percy was by his father's side within a second. Malfoy merely watched with a smirk on his face as Percy helped his father sit up. Arthur Weasley was too weak to even stand, and Percy found himself shaking with barely controlled anger.

"Dad?" When his father didn't respond, Percy called out again, squeezing his father's shoulder gently as he did so. "Dad!"

It was many long seconds later when his father showed any sign of hearing him. He slowly, almost fearfully, turned his head towards Percy.

Percy didn't want to imagine what kind of torture his father had gone through. He forced himself to look into the pair of blue eyes that were so blank and empty, waiting for any sign of recognition.

"It's me, Dad," he said. "Percy."

"P…Percy?" his father choked out, his eyes still unfocused. "Why… why are…"

The rest of the sentence was too soft for Percy to catch. He clutched his wand, his previous caution all but forgotten.

"What have you done to him?" he gritted out, looking up at Malfoy.

Malfoy smirked, a sadistic twisting of his lips. "I've warned you before, haven't I, Mr. Weasley? I can't guarantee your father's safety forever. The longer you hesitate, the more danger he'll be in."

"You bastard!" Percy pushed himself up and raised his wand, only to find Malfoy's wand pointed right between his eyes.

"Don't mistake me, Mr. Weasley," drawled Malfoy. "If you want to know what was done to your father, why don't you ask yourself?"

"That's enough, Lucius." Voldemort's voice rang through the hall. The Dark Lord had been watching the scene in silence up until that point. "Leave us."

Malfoy looked disappointed, but that expression was quickly concealed. He kept his wand trained on Percy and raised an eyebrow mockingly.

With great effort, Percy swallowed his anger and grudgingly lowered his half-raised wand. Malfoy was not the one he had to deal with this time.

Shooting Percy a look filled with great contempt, Malfoy lowered his own wand. He turned to face the Dark Lord and bowed. "As you wish, my Lord."

Percy watched with bated breath as Malfoy left, then he straightened up and turned to face the only other occupant in the room. He willed himself to focus on the battle ahead.

Voldemort was a completely different kind of enemy from Malfoy. Despite Malfoy's numerous crimes, he was still human. Malfoy still

had feelings. But Voldemort… Voldemort was a cold-blooded monster through and through, and because of that, there was no way to predict what the Dark Lord was planning next. Percy had no idea what was in store for him… or his father.

"Ah, I see you like my… gift, Percy," began the Dark Lord.

Wordlessly, Percy moved over to stand in front of his father, shielding him from Voldemort. He let this action speak more than anything else he could have said. "You'll have to kill me first."

"Courage alone will get you nowhere," said Voldemort. "Can't you see, Percy? I have in my hand a very powerful weapon. Or have you not considered why your father is still alive until now?"

Percy had wondered, of course, as painful as that thought was. And now, he tried to refuse acknowledging the answer that had become so obvious.

"If you think you can use my Dad to threaten me, you're wrong. I will not join you, no matter what," he said firmly. That was right, he told himself sternly, his father would never want him to do that.

Voldemort gave a chilly laugh. He seemed confident that Percy would join him eventually, but that made Percy all the more determined to prove him wrong.

"I see that your father's life alone is not enough to compel you to my side, but no matter." Voldemort continued in a hiss so quiet that Percy had to strain to hear, "Remember, young Percy, Lord Voldemort always gets what he wants, and I know just how to break a man like you."

Percy couldn't help but glance at his father. Whatever was coming, he could fight it, he had to, for both of them.

That seemed to be exactly what Voldemort had expected. The Dark Lord shook his head. "I have no intention to hurt your precious father, Percy," his said slowly, but the growing sneer in his voice was

unmistakable. "No, whatever is going to happen to him, it will not be by my hand."

"What do you-"

The words died on Percy's lips as a vague image of something very terrible flashed across his mind.

"If you want to know what was done to your father, why don't you ask yourself?"

What Malfoy had said earlier suddenly came back to him, and Percy had an inkling that he knew what Malfoy had been talking about.

The mirth in the Dark Lord's crimson eyes was maddening now. "Tell me, how did it feel to torture your own father?"

"What-"

Percy stared back at his father in shock as a suppressed memory suddenly resurfaced.

"Crucio!"

He pointed his wand at the man inside the cell and watched emotionlessly as the man screamed and twitched on the floor. The man looked up, and their eyes met…

Looking into the same pair of eyes now, Percy involuntarily stumbled back. Panic seized him upon recalling the self-suppressed memory. Whatever composure he had felt just now had evaporated into nothing, leaving behind a dreadful guilt..

"So you do remember," a hissing voice reached his ears. Percy numbly turned around to face Voldemort.

Yes, he remembered it all – saying the incantation of one of the Unforgivables, hearing his Dad's scream and watching with a sickeningly pleasant yet empty feeling that he couldn't seem to shake off even now…and it had all been under the Imperius Curse. The fact

that his actions had been under the control of a curse that he knew he couldn't fight was reassuring, but the unsettling fact remained that he had still tortured his own father.

"The Imperius Curse has its uses, that is true, but what I want is not a mindless puppet," said Voldemort, staring down at Percy from his throne. "No, what I need is a loyal, willing servant who can easily gain Dumbledore's trust. Even better if that person is already inside the old fool's circle."

Percy stiffened. A spy? Had the situation been different, he would have felt indignant that the Dark Lord would choose him out of all the other Order members to be his spy.

"But aside from direct control, there are still a lot that the Imperius Curse can do. Surely you know about that by now?" Percy had a dreadful feeling about where Voldemort was going. "Tell me, Percy, have you ever killed? You have already tried the Curciatus Curse, imagine what it would be like to kill your own father."

Percy froze. "No…"

"This kind of… attachment," Voldemort spared Percy's father a glance, "is nothing more than a weakness, and that is something Dumbledore has always failed to realize. Even though he knows it very well, he has never been willing to admit that this kind of ties can easily be broken," he looked straight into Percy's eyes, "and used."

Percy's eyes widened in fear as the Dark Lord rose from his throne and moved towards him. It was a totally different kind of fear than what he had felt moments ago when he was fighting for just his own life. Percy felt like he was being stalked by a cruel predator, and there was nothing he could do about it.

"Yes, fear for what is to come, Percy. Nothing can break a man faster than fear." Voldemort's eyes were filled with monstrous glee. "Imagine what your family would say when you tell them that you and your own hand that killed your father. Or perhaps it would be better to watch the whole brood of them die one by one under your own wand?"

Percy broke. "No!" he shouted, raising his wand. "Stupefy!"

The Dark Lord calmly sidestepped his curse and-

"Imperio!"

Then everything became quiet. Suddenly, Percy felt as though all his previous worries had vanished, no, he now realized that they were not important at all. He allowed himself to relax into the pleasant, dream-like feeling…

Turn around…

He heard a voice echoing in his head. Nothing mattered more than obeying this voice.

Turn around….

He did as the voice said and found a man sitting on the floor before him. The man looked up wearily. He desperately tried to say something, but Percy paid him no mind.

Raise your wand, now… use the killing curse… raise your wand…

Percy felt his arm lifting, raising his wand. He aimed it at the man before him, then he-

NO!

Abruptly, he snapped out from that dream-like state. Percy looked down at his outstretched wand, then back at his father, and he stumbled backwards in blind horror as he realized what he had come very close to doing.

Still in shock, he turned around dully to find that the Dark Lord was not looking at him, but at the person standing by the doorway.

"Harry…"

Harry took a few tentative steps into the room, still gauging the Dark Lord's reaction. He studiously avoided meeting the eyes of the two Weasleys, choosing only to focus on Voldemort.

"Get out, Potter!" Voldemort ordered.

Harry stopped a short distance from where Voldemort and Percy were and stood his ground. He knew that he had to do this, even though he had little idea of how he should proceed from here. It might be his inner Gryffindor, but there was no way he could just stand outside and act as if nothing had happened when he knew Percy's fate if he didn't interfere.

That was probably exactly what Lucius Malfoy had wanted. The elder Malfoy had told Harry, accompanied with his ever-present smirk, what Voldemort was doing to the Weasleys when he ran into Harry. Harry knew it could not be an accident that Malfoy "just happened" to meet him in the huge manor, since Malfoy had long seen him as a threat to his position within the Dark Lord's ranks. It was not surprising that Malfoy would want to set Harry up against Voldemort, knowing that Harry would never let the Weasleys come to harm. Harry knew that this was Malfoy's plan to get rid of him without implicating himself, but Harry had chosen to charge straight into the trap anyway.

"Could you not hear that I ordered you to leave?" Voldemort spat, harshly. Then he switched to parseltongue. /Take him back to his room, Nagini!/

Nagini, who had come along with Harry, first looked up at him, then swiveled her head to Voldemort, obviously caught in some sort of dilemma. Finally she turned back at Harry.

/Let's leave,/ she hissed. Then, seeing Harry had no intention to move, she slithered up to him pleadingly. /Please, Master Alex./

Voldemort stiffened. Harry could feel Nagini recoil from beside his feet as she realized her mistake. While Nagini had insisted calling Harry her 'Master Alex' in private, she had been careful in never

doing so in front of Voldemort – even she could foretell what kind of trouble it might cause. But after spending so much time with Harry lately, it seemed such a slip was inevitable. Only that it was a very untimely slip.

/So he is your master now?/ hissed Voldemort in a dangerous voice.

/No! Master, please-/

Voldemort snarled. /Worthless creature!/

Before Harry could react, a jet of light hit Nagini, banishing her violently from the room.

There was no time for Harry to worry about Nagini as Voldemort snapped his attention to him. Self-consciously, Harry reached down for his wand.

Voldemort caught his movement and bared his teeth in a snarl. "Is that how you want to finish this?" he said in a low voice. In an instant, his wand was raised and pointed at Harry's forehead. "Are you trying to betray me, Potter?"

Harry dared not move. Now was not the time for that answer, he told himself. The Weasleys' safety was his greatest concern at the moment and that was what he should be concentrating on. He had to calm down and think rationally.

It was not a matter of loyalty, not yet. Harry knew for a fact that they stood no chance at all in a direct duel against Voldemort. He might have thought differently before, but with past experience and his months as a Death Eater, Harry had seen first hand exactly what kind of power Voldemort wielded. He had come to realize that it was indeed because of pure luck that he had survived his first four years at Hogwarts, but now…

He glanced at the two Weasleys in the room. No, it was not a situation that they could depend on luck to save them. He couldn't bring them into any more danger than they were already in.

Slowly, Harry released his grip on his own wand and let his hand fall to his side. From the corner of his view, he could see Percy shake his head, almost in resignation.

"I just don't want to see them hurt," said Harry quietly, well aware that Voldemort's wand was still pointing at him.

"Whether they are harmed or not is for me to decide." There was a dangerous undertone in Voldemort's voice. Seconds later, he finally lowered his wand. "Get out now, Potter, or do you wish you stay here and watch?"

Harry gritted his teeth. He had to think of something. What should he-

"Fight him, Harry!" Percy chose that moment to yell out. "Together we can do this!"

Two things happened then: Voldemort slashed his wand downwards in a brutal motion and Percy's scream rang out through the hall.

"Percy!" Without thinking, Harry rushed over to the redhead's side.

Percy let out a painful grunt as Harry reached him and knelt down. He was clenching a side of his face with his hand so tightly that his knuckles were white. Harry paled as he saw a tremendous amount of blood was pouring through Percy's fingers, and upon closer inspection he saw a deep cut running right across Percy's left eye. Harry carefully laid a hand on Percy's back, supporting him to a sitting position. Despite the pain he must have been in, Percy's blue eye, the remaining one, met Harry's squarely; his message was clear. As Percy lifted his head to face Voldemort again, his gaze was burning with resolve. Harry couldn't remember seeing the normally stoic Percy showing this kind of desperate emotion before. The will to fight till the end, the courage to fight for what he believed was right; it made Harry's heart cringe with a strange sense of… longing.

Putting away his concern over Percy for the moment, Harry looked up bleakly. He was not surprised to find Voldemort staring down at them in pure, bitter contempt.

"Fools. Do you think this kind of resistance can triumph over Lord Voldemort?" he asked, but it was not a question that they had to answer. His gaze shifted to Percy. "I see you are not ready to receive the power I was going to give you. What a shame that you will not live to have a second chance."

For the second time that day, Harry reached for his wand. Beside him, Percy had just retrieved his fallen wand from the floor with his free hand, but Harry, hand still on Percy's back, could feel him quickly slipping away from blood loss. It was up to him now.

"And you," Voldemort now addressed Harry, "I've warned you before. I do not tolerate disobedience," he said in a low, dangerous voice. "Be glad that I will not kill you at the moment, but your actions warrant… punishment."

"No!"

Percy cried, face chalk-white, just as Harry realized who Voldemort was targeting. Harry leaped to his feet and raised his wand- but it was too late, Voldemort was too quick for him-

"Avada Kedavra!"

A sickly green jet of light shot through the air, missing Harry's chin by inches. It flew passed him, seemingly unstoppable… until it collided straight into Mr. Weasley's chest.

Mr. Weasley's body fell soundlessly onto the ground, his once warm and kind blue eyes now staring blankly at them. Percy was fixed on his father in horrified silence. With every ounce of the willpower he had left, Harry pushed back all his emotions just as he usually did in a raid. The fight had barely begun..

He turned his head back to the Dark Lord with his wand still outstretched. He looked up slowly, and for the first time in months, all Harry could see was Lord Voldemort, not Tom Riddle.

For a moment, Harry felt as though he was back in the graveyard of his fourth year, where he had faced Voldemort for the first time. It had

also been a duel with each of them holding the other at wand point, only it was a very different situation now. It had been so much easier to hate his opponent then, but now… it was the one situation that Harry had dreaded since Nicolas had told him the prophecy. Still, he held his wand steadily, his eyes staring straight into the Dark Lord's own.

"So this is your decision," said Voldemort in a bland, toneless voice, "I see."

Harry's mind was still frozen at what had happened since he stepped into the room. All he knew now was that he had to fight, for Percy and the Weasleys, if not for himself. He would not let the family that was so dear to him to lose two members in one day. Not if he could do anything to prevent it. Harry swore that he would fight if it was the only way he could help, even though his mind told him fighting was nothing but a reckless move with no chance of succeeding. But there was no way around it… or was there?

Was there, perhaps, a way to save Percy without this fight?

It was then something resurfaced in his mind. A memory, from his other life in the past.

"The life debt." As soon as the words left his lips, Harry knew that there was no turning back now. In more ways than one, mentioning this would break something that could never be repaired.

"What did you say, Potter?" Voldemort hissed. Though it was a question, his look of distaste suggested that he had heard what Harry said clearly.

Harry lowered his wand slowly.

"The life debt," he repeated. "Fifty years ago… in the Chamber of Secrets. You swore a life debt then."

"Harry?" Percy's voice was weak, but the question in it was clear.

Harry shook his head, still not looking away from Voldemort. Now was not the time for explanation. There was a tense silence as Voldemort stood still, his red eyes unreadable. None of the Dark Lord's thoughts could seep through their connection and Harry had no way of guessing what was going to happen. It was after a long pause that Voldemort spoke in a strained voice.

"And what do you want with that, Potter? Are you trying to beg for your life?"

Harry was surprised that Voldemort would even acknowledge that debt, but he was in no mind to analyze that fact.

"No," he replied at once. He inclined his head towards Percy. "His life."

Voldemort's snake-like features contorted in anger, making Harry jerk in alarm. Would that work? It had been a long time ago, and it had not been a debt that Harry, or 'Alex', had wanted to accept in the first place. Perhaps Harry should never have bought that up, perhaps it was a mistake to remind the Dark Lord of-

Voldemort waved his wand towards the entrance. "Leave, Weasley," he commanded. "I do not guarantee how long the path leading outside will remain clear."

"What-"

Harry turned to look at Percy. "Go, Percy," he nearly shouted.

Percy seemed to understand the situation well enough despite his weakened state, yet he hesitated. He looked at Harry, then at his father, still clenching his wand tightly. It was then Harry realized that Percy did not want to run away at all. Percy wanted to fight. Of course, that was understandable since Mr. Weasley had just been-

Harry shook his head. Percy's bleeding was getting worse and Harry knew the redhead needed a healer quick. It was no time for recklessness. However Percy might feel, Harry's priority was to get him to safety.

"Go, Percy, please," he whispered. Harry took in a deep breath to compose his inner turmoil. "Go!"

Percy gritted his teeth and slowly pushed himself onto his feet. He was trembling and his good eye showed the pain he was in. He stared wordlessly at Voldemort for a long time, a mixture of grief, anger, and helplessness evident in his face before he finally turned away. With one last glance at his father, Percy clenched his fists and ran out of the room.

When the door slammed shut again, Harry reluctantly looked up at Voldemort, dreading his reaction. The Dark Lord's expression was unreadable as always. Neither of them spoke or moved for a long time. Finally, Voldemort turned away in silence. He did not bother to spare Harry a single glance as he swept past him and left.

Harry sank to the ground once the door closed behind the Dark Lord. Like Percy, he was trembling madly. Helplessly, he hugged his knees close to his chest, seeking for the comfort that he knew could never be found.

It might not have been obvious for most Death Eaters, but things had changed since that disastrous meeting between Harry and Voldemort. Two weeks had passed since then. Everything seemed to be going on as per normal in the residence of the Dark Lord, but someone sensitive enough would sense an air of restlessness surrounding the place.

The source of this uneasiness was caused by the continuous silence of the Dark Lord. The raids were still going on, but it was apparent that Voldemort's attention was not on them.

Ever since that day, Harry had been feeling sporadic surges of anger coming from Voldemort. It was unlike anything he had felt from the Dark Lord before, but Harry couldn't identify exactly what the difference was.

Sighing, Harry lay flat on his bed and shut his eyes. Images of what had happened that day were still plaguing him. There was no way for him to find out how the Weasleys were coping with Mr. Weasley's death; he didn't even know if Percy had survived the injury from Voldemort's curse.

Groaning, Harry ran a hand through his hair. He didn't want to think about anything related to Voldemort at all. Something was happening, definitely, but what was it?

So far Voldemort had not come to his room even once. There was no punishment for what he had done two weeks ago, nor were there any signs suggesting that Voldemort had any plans concerning him. There was simply nothing, nothing but an ever increasing feeling of dread, and that was a kind of torture in itself.

There was very little Harry could do but wait, and he hated every second of it. In a way, he knew whatever that was coming could not be good. The mess between him and Voldemort had now run so deep that Harry simply couldn't see how he could even begin clearing it up, or understanding it, for that matter.

Friends or foes. If only things could be that simple.

He sat up as his scar began to tingle again, which was immediately followed by another surge of anger flowing through his scar. Normally this would stop within minutes, but not this time; something was different this time-

Harry gasped as the pain in his scar rapidly intensified. He bit his lip hard enough that blood flowed, and tried to strengthen his mental shield. Voldemort was furious right now, and that anger… It was directed at Harry.

The pain subsided a little as Harry continued to work on Occluding his mind, but it was not completely gone, as the overwhelming anger that Harry had sensed from Voldemort was still smoldering. Coupled with what he knew of the situation, Harry could only think of several possible conclusions of what had just happened, and all of them

pointed to the one piece of information that Voldemort had been trying to get from Snape.

A sense of foreboding rushed over him. If his suspicions were correct, then that would mean Snape was now in great danger. Before Harry could decide on what to do, he heard a voice coming from outside his door.

/Master Alex!/

Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise and hastily opened the door. Nagini slithered into the room. She looked almost relieved when she saw Harry.

Harry hurried to her side. /Nagini/

He had not seen Nagini for two weeks, and had worried that something might have happened to her. Seeing the snake now, Harry was glad to see that she seemed fine.

/Master has forbidden me to look for you,/ explained Nagini, still scanning him from head to feet. /Were you injured in any way, Master Alex? Did anything happen to you that day? Are you-/

/I'm fine, Nagini,/ said Harry, allowing himself a grim smile before turning completely serious again. /Didn't you say the Dark Lord has forbidden you to come here? You should go back, you know how he punishes-/

/No!/ Nagini sounded desperate now. /I was in the dungeon with Master just now. He was interrogating that traitor, and I think he found out something… something about you./ Nagini hesitated, still avoiding Harry's gaze, then she slowly lifted her head. /I…. I think he might want to kill you, Master Alex./

A/N: So Voldemort finally breaks into Severus' mind and finds out about the prophecy. Harry is in danger, but he is not the only one.

Two more chapters before the end. There might be a sequel, or there might not, you'll know the answer after reading the next chapter.

Chapter 28: Curse of the Past

It was strange that Harry felt almost nothing when he heard that Voldemort now wanted him dead. There was nothing but numbness, not unlike the emptiness he forced himself to feel during a raid. The only visible sign of him being affected was the slight trembling of his body, and even then that could only be seen with close observation. Within himself, though, his suppressed emotions were threatening to break through the brittle wall that was holding them back. It had already been close to crumbling –yet again- after the incident with Bellatrix where Harry had lost control and almost killed the witch with a Cruciatus Curse. And now, after hearing the news concerning Voldemort, Harry's raging emotions were soon becoming too much for the fragile wall to handle.

Still, Harry chose not to acknowledge it. Instead, he squeezed his eyes shut briefly and he let his Gryffindor instinct take over. It helped him to focus only on the situation at hand and nothing else.

He turned to the huge serpent that had been watching him intently. Her reptilian façade, as usual, gave away nothing, but her bright eyes betrayed concern. /Tell me, Nagini, that… traitor, is he still alive?/

/He collapsed once Master was finished with him. He's still breathing, but that's probably all he could do./

Harry shivered. Could Snape have been driven insane by the torture? No, the mere thought of it was wrong. Once again, he wondered why the Order hadn't done anything, since it had been weeks since Harry had told Draco of Snape's exact location. Why hadn't anyone bothered to even attempt to rescue the Potions Master?

But that matter was a peripheral concern now. Voldemort had tortured what he wanted out from Snape, and even if Snape was sill alive at the moment, it would not be for long; the Dark Lord had no more reason to keep him alive.

Of course, the exact same thing could be said for Harry himself.

/Can I come with you this time, Master Alex?/ asked Nagini as Harry hastily threw a cloak around himself and, fingers hesitating for a second, grabbed his mask as well.

/What?/ He momentarily stopped his rushed actions and turned to the huge serpent.

/I know this place well, I can help you escape./

Harry frowned. /I… thank you for your warning, Nagini, but you can't stay with me. It would be best for you to go back to the Dark Lord now., He wouldn't be happy if he knew you came here in the first place./

Nagini protested at once. /But! You are in danger Master A-/

Harry shook his head firmly. /No, he is your master now. I have no claim over you, especially after I've gotten you in enough trouble as it is./

/But you are my master too, aren't you?/ If her voice had been an expressive one, Nagini would have sounded hurt.

/You can't serve two masters who are on opposite sides,/ said Harry softly. /You understand what I mean, don't you?/

/You are my first master,/ Nagini insisted, her tone utterly serious, /and so my only rightful master./

Harry was speechless. He was stunned and overwhelmed at the loyalty Nagini was showing him. He had yet another choice to make, then, but thankfully,it was an easy one this time.

/I told you to take care of him fifty years ago, remember?/ he said, /Go back to him. He-he needs someone to be there for him../ He had said similar words before, but why did it feel so different this time? When Nagini still was evidently reluctant, Harry added with a sigh, /Treat this as an order from your master then. Take care of him, and yourself./

At that, Nagini lowered her head in defeat. /Very well, Master Alex./

A sort of painful, regretful grief welled inside Harry as he watched Nagini slither away, and he had to clench his fists to calm down.

Voldemort would be coming for him, soon, and Harry had no wish to stay in his room and wait for his death. He needed to leave the manor right now if he was to escape; there was no time to waste.

But the thought of leaving Snape to rot in the dungeon made him pause. He was probably the only one who knew what had happened to the Potions Master and the life-threatening situation his former teacher was in. Snape would surely die if Harry left now, and Harry would then be responsible for the loss of yet another life.

He couldn't leave, not yet. He still had work to do.

Or at least that was what he was persuading himself as he left his room for the last time. Perhaps, even then, in the deepest part of his heart, Harry already knew that Snape was not the primary reason as to why Harry had not listened to his common sense and gotten out of the place immediately. But since he had already lied to himself for so long, why should he acknowledge the truth now?

"My Lord-"

A wave of Voldemort's wand cut off whatever the Death Eater wanted to say and sent him twitching on the ground, screaming in pain, but Voldemort paid him no mind. He stalked past the Death Eater to his personal chamber. Anger was boiling inside him like never before.

Either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.

So it was Potter all along. He had known, from the very beginning, that the boy would be a threat. Seeing it confirmed by the prophecy, had done nothing except to reinforce this feeling.

He now knew beyond a doubt that it had been Potter's plan all along – to hide under the pretense of a loyal servant and wait for the time to strike. When had Potter become so cunning, so manipulative?

Voldemort snarled and jerked his wand ferociously, causing the shelves and the table on one side of his room to explode. Broken wood splinters flew everywhere. Books and parchments scattered over the floor. But all that did nothing to calm his rage.

The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not.

Whatever power Potter had didn't matter. He would end this before Potter's supposed 'power' even had a chance to reveal itself.

His eyes flickered to the floor, drawn to the light glowing brightly amongst the debris.

Of course, the necklace. The necklace he hated with a fury.

His anger, barely constrained under a veneer of coldness, flared again at the single light source in the room, glowing strongly and steadily in the dark. Even with his feelings, the protection charm was still as strong as ever, as if it was taunting him.

He summoned the necklace from the ground and held it with a crushing grip, as the entirety of his anger channeled itself towards the innocent-looking necklace . Today, he would destroy his past once and for all, and a mere protection spell could do nothing to stop him.

But as he opened his fist to hiss a curse at it, he realized for the first time that the protection spell was not repulsing him. The necklace was resting on his palm peacefully, with a warm, almost welcoming glow.

Concealing himself in the shadows, Draco gingerly made his way along the edge of the forest with the fake galleon of the HA biting into his palm. Only Draco and Harry could send a signal through the

galleons. Draco knew that signal had definitely not originated from him; in fact, he had almost forgotten about it until he received a message from it five minutes ago. That left only Harry as a possibility, but it didn't seem possible that he would do such a thing so suddenly. Draco had considered ignoring the signal, but instinct cautioned him that something urgent might have happened. It made him uneasy. In the end, he decided to check out the call.

Even though the location of the meeting was not specified in the galleon, Draco could only think of one place where Harry could be - the hidden spot in the forest where they had met twice before, one with Draco confronting Harry and the other with Harry giving him the location of Severus.

He didn't know what he was expecting when he arrived at the meeting spot, but he found himself tense as he saw Harry already standing there, waiting for him. He didn't even bother to ask what had happened, when one look at Harry's face told Draco that something was indeed very wrong.

"There's a meeting later tonight, so I guessed that you might be here," Harry began as soon as he had finished warding the area around them.

Draco nodded. The fake galleons would not have worked if they had been too far apart. "I didn't know you still had it with you."

"I kept it in my money bag. One of the few things that I didn't leave at Hogwarts," said Harry, hint of sadness crept into his voice. "But that's not the point." He turned grave as he met Draco's eyes. "Snape is in danger. The Dark Lord has found out what he wanted from him."

Draco froze. "What? Are you sure?"

Harry nodded grimly.

"But he is still alive, isn't he?" asked Draco, almost fearing the answer.

"According to Nagini, yes."

It took a second before Draco could relate the name Nagini to the Dark Lord's pet snake, and a second more to remember Harry's ability to speak to snakes. "It could be a trap."

Harry shook his head. "She's loyal to me," he said, sounding almost regretful. He looked up at Draco, but his gaze was uncertain. "He's still alive, but the Dark Lord will come back for him any time, or-"

"Give him to some Death Eaters as a toy," Draco finished with a sigh. "I can't let that happen." The words were out of his mouth before he realized what that meant.

"What about the Order? I thought they were coming for him."

Draco let out a light snort. "Dumbledore never intended to save Severus' life. All he cared for was to protect what Severus knew. Not that his precious Order will be of much help, of course. Without the Dark Mark on their arms, the Dementors would attack them right away. Their souls wouldn't last a second in there." He didn't bother keeping the bitterness and anger out of his voice, remembering what Dumbledore had dared to ask of him.

"His cell was warded, you say?"

Draco nodded. "A ward-breaker could break in with some amount of difficulty, but it can be done."

"How about the Dementors?"

"They would attack anyone without a Dark Mark."

Draco didn't like the look of defeat on Dumbledore's face.

"I'm afraid we don't have much choice then."

Draco narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

Dumbledore no longer had that infuriating twinkle in his eyes. "It would be too risky to send a rescue party in at the moment."

"You promised to save him once I've found out where he is!" Draco snapped, half-jumping from his seat, snarling at the man sitting opposite from him in unmasked anger.

He was furious with Dumbledore for abandoning Severus, and he was angry at himself for believing in that old fool for one second. How could he have fallen for this trick?

"Draco," said Dumbledore, sounding very tired, and very weary. "I will not send any Order members on a mission if I know there is no chance for success. You have seen it for yourself that, the security around Severus is too tight for me to attempt any rescue."

"And so you are leaving him there to die, aren't you?Just like what you did to Weasley," said Draco, relieved that his voice came out cold and cutting..

Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment, but Draco wasn't fooled by the show of weakness. Then Dumbledore answered. "I do what I must to bring this war to an end," he said. "And as such, Draco, I have one more favor to ask of you." Slowly, deliberately, he pulled out a small vial from his desk drawer.

Draco felt his blood freeze. "How dare you," he whispered, his voice shaking. "How dare you even suggest that?"

Dumbledore bowed his white head. "Severus knew a piece of information that can alter the situation of the whole war. It is a weapon that must not fall into Voldemort's hand."

"What information? What could be that important?"

"It is powerful enough to destroy what may be the only hope for our side to win this war."

Draco leaped to his feet. "You ask that favor," he spat the word, "from me. The most you can do is to give me some answers."

Dumbledore didn't seem affected by Draco's blatant hostility. "I'm just trying to protect you, Draco." Draco sneered at this, but Dumbledore

ignored the disrespectful expression. "You know what length Voldemort is willing to go for that piece of information. I made a mistake in letting Severus know about it, but I won't make the same mistake again."

Draco eyed the vial of potion placed on Dumbledore's desk, restraining himself from picking up that bottle and throwing it at Dumbledore's head in sheer frustration. It was a vial that he knew well; after all, it had been personally made by Severus. It was a deadly poison that was made from snake venom; it could kill a grown man within a second.

"You are asking me to kill my own godfather," said Draco, "and this is all you have to say?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I understand how angry you must be at the moment, but all I want is for you to consider this seriously," he said. "Voldemort will torture the information out of Severus until he gets what he wants, is that really the best for Severus? Or-"

"Save that for someone who would actually listen to your juvenile manipulations, Dumbledore," Draco drawled. Not bothering to hear what else Dumbledore had to say, he turned around and left. The bottle of poison was left untouched.

"What do you plan to do then?" Harry's voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

Draco hesitated. All he could say about the so-called plan that was forming in his mind was reckless at best, and downright suicidal if he had the courage to be honest with himself. To make it worse, even now, the thought of leaving Severus to death had not crossed his mind even once. He simply could not allow himself to sink as low as Dumbledore, not to mention that he had been brought up in a system that emphasized the paying back of debts. Even Slytherins had it in them to be fiercely loyal to their family and to the very few that they had given their trust – and Severus was both to him.

Still, the whole plan was simply too disgustingly Gryffindorish for Draco to even say it out loud. So instead of answering Harry truthfully,

Draco decided to bring up another question that could not be pushed back any longer.

"Are you coming with me?"

Draco expected the worst, but something in Harry's demeanor told him that the other boy might give a different answer this time. And even though he would never admit it, Draco desperately hoped that his instinct would prove right. He was beginning to understand why Gryffindors liked to work in groups whenever they attempted something unusually reckless.

Harry held his gaze for a long while, then a determined look entered the pair of green eyes. His answer was firm.

"I am."

Voldemort knew what had happened the moment he caught sight of Nagini slithering towards him from the direction he was heading to. Sensing her master's rage, the serpent did not dare to approach further.

/Who is your master, Nagini?/ hissed Voldemort.

/You don't have to ask, Master. I am yours./

Voldemort sneered. With a wave of his wand, he conjured a magical sphere around Nagini, locking her inside.

/You still deny your betrayal?/ he hissed. /When? When did you start listening to the boy's commands?/

Nagini did not answer immediately. The curse embedded inside the conjured cage was causing her unthinkable pain.

/Please, Mas-/

Voldemort intensified the curse he had placed on his snake. /I order you to answer me! When did that boy gain such loyalty from you?/

His patience was wearing thin, and he would have killed her on the spot, when Nagini finally spoke.

/Alex was my first master,/ she admitted with great reluctance, and the statement that her ultimate loyalty was forever with him went unsaid but known. She paused, then caught sight of Voldemort's darkened expression and hastily explained herself. /He bought me the year he met you. By the end of that year, he told me he was going home, to the future. He was so sad that he had to leave, and he was afraid you would feel lonely with him gone, so he ordered me to stay, and to protect you, like I did him./

Voldemort stared, unmoved, at Nagini for a while before hissing in a dangerous whisper, /So you were Potter's spy all along? No doubt you were delighted to see him again last year, to be reunited with your old master!/

Nagini remained silent, confirming the truth of Voldemort's words. He glanced towards the direction of Potter's room. He had no doubt that the boy had already learnt of his coming.

/It was foolish of you to stay behind while Potter ran for his cowardly, miserable life, Nagini,/ he said. /Did you really believe I could be deceived so easily?/

Nagini was very much weakened by the ongoing curse by now. It took a while before she managed an answer.

/Master Alex told me to stay behind. He ordered me to stand by you,/ Nagini sounded defeated. /And be there for you./

Something within Voldemort stirred at those words, but it was no match for his rage. Sparing a cold glance at Nagini, he released the curse he had placed on her, but did not free her for the conjured cage. He would deal with her later. Potter was his priority right now.

Turning away from Nagini, he considered his next move. There was no chance that Potter would still be in his room, but a quick check on the ward around manor also revealed that the boy had not run far.

Even better, then, that it had never been a problem for him to locate Potter. Reaching out with Legilimency, the answer of the boy's whereabouts quickly came to him.

The dungeon. Potter was trying to save Severus?

Instead of angering him further, that new discovery gave Voldemort a feeling of malicious triumph. That was the best proof on the boy's betrayal. He had been right about Potter all along.

A cruel smile slanted across his face as he strode towards the lower grounds of the manor. Potter's foolishness was making this so much easier.

Even though their Death Eater clothing should have been enough to avoid suspicion, Harry and Draco still traced their route to the dungeon very carefully. They walked in complete and utter silence. None of them had spoken a word since Draco had filled Harry in on his plan.

Harry had been surprised at how well prepared Draco was; apparently, the blonde had been planning a solo 'Operation Snape' for quite some time now. He had been searching for ways to bypass Voldemort's wards around Snape's cell, and to that effect had been teaching himself ward-breaking for weeks on end. Draco seemed convinced that the Order would not offer any help, and after witnessing the way the blonde spat Dumbledore's name, Harry had refrained from pressing further. In a way, he could guess at what had happened.

The plan was simple – Draco would lower the wards around Snape's cell just long enough for a portkey to work and escape using that portkey without anyone noticing. It was easier said than done, of course. The most worrisome thing was that the plan had a critical

flaw- one that was huge enough to stop Draco from executing his plan until now. Now, he couldn't afford to wait any longer.

"The Dark Mark," Draco told Harry. "Only those who have it can enter the dungeon, and that means only those in the Dark Lord's inner circle. The moment I get Severus out, the Dark Lord will know there's another spy. I'm Severus' godson, who else would he suspect?"

Harry would have said himself, but he had ultimately decided to keep silent. Draco didn't need to know about what was happening between Harry and Voldemort, and Harry definitely didn't need to add to his anxiety. The blonde would find out soon enough, in any case.

Not for the first time that day, Harry wondered about the sanity of his actions. Without a doubt, Voldemort was aiming to kill him, and yet here Harry was, wasting his time to inform Draco about the danger Snape was in, and also actually helping him in the rescue effort. That had been something he had firmly refused to participate in a month ago.

He knew the window of escape given to him by Nagini had certainly closed by now. Voldemort must have had already found out Harry was not in his room. He would now be hunting him down.

Despite that, Harry simply couldn't find it in himself to care.

Perhaps from the beginning, the thought of fleeing for his life had never crossed his mind. He knew it was useless. He knew that the final facedown with Voldemort was inevitable. And he was so tired of running away.

Harry felt oddly calm as he strode deeper into the dungeon. Screams from the nearby cells echoed in the dark corridors, but a kind of grim determination that had welled up inside him kept him walking on with a blank face and steady steps. For the first time in months, with foggy emotions cleared away, Harry could see the path that fate had laid out before him clearly. There was only one direction, and for some reason, that thought gave Harry a strange relief.

Draco was trailing silently beside him, and his nervousness was palpable. Such an emotion was understandable, naturally, though Harry knew it was unnecessary. However dangerous Draco's situation might be now, Harry's instinct told him that the blonde would not be in any danger today. Voldemort only had one target in mind, and the person was not Draco.

As if taunting Harry for even daring to think that something might turn out right for once, the atmosphere around them suddenly shifted. The temperature dropped drastically, and even the corridors looked darker and more eerie than a second before. Harry and Draco halted in an instant, hearts pounding wildly as they scanned their surroundings for any immediate danger. They raised their wands and edged closer to each other. Then their eyes met, both alert and wary.

"Dementor," Draco mouthed, looking pale.

Harry nodded. There was no sign of the soul-sucking creatures yet, but from the chill in the damp air, both of them could feel that the Dementors, which had been on their side so far, were now targeting them. And there could only be one reason for it.

"He knew," Harry whispered in a hoarse voice.

Voldemort had moved so much faster than he had expected. He had to act quickly, or else Draco would be dragged into unnecessary danger with him.

His resolve firmed, he turned to the blonde beside him. "Run, Draco. They are coming for me," and filled with dread as he was, he managed to keep his voice calm. "Go get Snape and get out of here."

"What? What are you-"

Too late. The Dementors had reached them, pouring in from the direction they had come from.

"Run!" yelled Harry, as he started to run in the opposite direction, grabbing Draco roughly by the arm. The other boy winced, but soon realized the greater danger.

They moved as quickly as they could, trying to outrun the Dementors that were floating towards them from behind like an unstoppable dark mist. They soon realized that it was a lost battle. As their legs gradually tired, the Dementors grew too fast for them. Within minutes, their pursuers had caught up with them, surrounding them in an oppressive mass.

Harry gritted his teeth, struggling against the Dementors' influence. He was dimly aware that Draco had fired off a spell that threw the nearest Dementor backward, but more were advancing towards them.

Doing his best to clear his mind, Harry raised his wand.

"Expecto Patronum!" he yelled.

A weak silvery mist shot out from his wand, so weak that it disappeared before even reaching the first Dementor. Harry tried again, attempting to call up happy memories, but to no avail. His mind was a total, complete blank.

"Expecto Patronum!"

Nothing happened. Not even a mist was conjured.

Harry backed into a wall as the Dementors closed in. He could hear Draco's scream nearby, but his mother's screaming was even louder, echoing ruthlessly in his ears.

He needed help.

The Dementors reached out for him. They seemed more intent to capture him than to suck his soul out…

And he only knew one way to call for help.

His hand moved almost instinctively, drawing out a complicated pattern with his wand that he now knew by heart. His wand glowed, but Harry could hardly see it as darkness began to engulf him. Then a familiar sensation rushed through him, telling him that he was

successful and filling him with a sudden strength that kept him from losing consciousness.

Attack!

Harry wasn't sure whether he had cried that out loud, but another surge of power from his wand assured him that his 'helpers' had received his command.

Almost immediately, the cold around the place began to disperse. Harry let out a deep breath he didn't realize he was holding as the relentless attack of his worst memories against his Occlumency shield finally stopped.

He regained his wits enough to look up and stare, slightly stunned, at the sight before him. At least a dozen of Inferi were holding the Dementors back, preventing them from getting close to Harry or Draco.

But now was not the time to ponder on how the soulless Inferi would fare against the Dementors. Still weak from the Dementors' attack, Harry stumbled over to where Draco was, on the other side of the corridor. The blonde had fallen onto the ground, muscles trembling involuntarily, and he had a haunted look in his grey eyes. Only then did it occur to Harry that Draco had never encountered a Dementor attack. To him, the Dementors had never been on the 'other side' before.

"Come on, Draco." Harry shook his companion lightly, but the blonde gave no indication of hearing him.

The urgency of the situation made Harry push aside his concern for the moment. The Dementors could only be hold back for so long; there was no time to waste at all.

Harry pulled Draco to his feet and slung the blonde's arm around his shoulder, supporting him. With a last look at the defense wall built up by the small army of Inferi, Harry scrambled as far off as he could with Draco, running deeper into the dungeon and escaping as far as

they possibly could until they finally reached the iron door that lead to Snape's cell.

They stopped as one, panting heavily. The cold caused by the Dementors had disappeared, but Harry had no way to know if the ghoulish creatures were still chasing after them. Though, it was strange that they were only coming at them from one direction, almost as if they were trying to push Harry and Draco further back into the dungeon. Trapping them there.

Harry stopped his thoughts. Of course, this had to be exactly what Voldemort wanted.

He turned towards Draco, who was slumped against a wall. "Are you all right?"

Draco's normally already pale face was drained of all colour. "I… I saw-" He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. When he spoke again, he seemed a little calmer. "We need to get going before they catch up with us, or before the Dark Lord decides to send some Death Eaters in to kill us."

Harry shook his head. "He won't send anyone here," he said with certainty. "The Dementors attacked us, but they were out to capture, not to kill. They didn't stop us from escaping inwards. What they were doing was blocking our way out. The Dark Lord wants to trap us here." He looked at Draco with a grim expression. "And all these is because he's coming here himself."

A hint of unsuppressed fear crossed Draco's eyes. "What? How would you-"

"He's coming here for me."

That shocked Draco into silence. It was a tense moment before he managed to speak again. "Is… is there something I need to know?"

Harry hesitated. This matter was not something he wanted to share with anyone, but Draco deserved some answers.

"That secret that Snape was keeping was a prophecy about me and the Dark Lord," he said, holding back some details. Some things just could not be said. "Because of what the prophecy says, the Dark Lord is now hunting me down. Personally."

Some kind of realization seemed to have dawned on Draco. "So that's why he wanted me to-" he trailed off. He shook his head and stared back at Harry, this time in disbelief. "Then why did you come with me in the first place? You should have fled instead of trapping yourself in where the Dark Lord keeps his -"

Draco, after being quite close to Harry for a year, seemed to have finally caught on. "You never planned to run away, did you?" he asked in a low voice.

"I only realized that the moment I agreed to help you," Harry admitted. He grimaced. "Though I suppose you might have a better success with me drawing the attention away from you, instead of leading him right here." He sighed. "Listen, Draco, you have to use your portkey to get away from here as quickly as you can after you've rescued Snape. The Dark Lord will be here soon, and I'll try to stall him a little, because he'd automatically assume that I was Snape's rescuer. So as long as you escape before he finds you, you should be safe."

"Are you insane?" Draco hissed. "We're going to rescue Severus together. Then you're coming with me."

"You won't have enough time to get Snape out if he's already on his way here, and you know that very well," Harry countered. He averted his eyes Draco's angry yet desperate glare and went on, softly, almost to himself, "There's nowhere for me to run to anymore, Draco. I have to face him. There isn't any other way to end this."

"End this? You mean committing suicide, Potter," Draco spat.

"I might not live through this, but I don't intend to go down without a fight." Harry held Draco's gaze once again. "I will face him, no matter how it's going to end. I can't go with you, but I'll try to buy you as much time as I can. I… I'm sorry. Please understand, Draco."

Draco gritted his teeth. His emotions were plain for Harry to see – hurt, fear, and betrayal.

"Why are you doing all these for a monster?" he asked quietly, turning around and nearly slamming his left forearm against the iron door to unlock it with his Dark Mark. "He can't be changed."

Draco opened the door and went in without turning his head, without looking back. But he paused briefly before disappearing through the doorway when Harry whispered, clear enough for the blonde to hear, "I know."

The heavy iron door closed behind Draco with a sound of finality, leaving Harry alone. He knew he had hurt Draco, badly. But there was something only he could do; something only he could end.

He slowly turned around and took a few steps away from the iron door. Then he waited, holding his wand loosely by his side. As an afterthought, he reached up to pull down his hood and removed his mask. He would face Voldemort face to face this time.

His certainty that no one else would be coming did not waver. Voldemort would be coming for him alone.

Just the two of them. It had always been this way, and today it would be no different.

A distant scream broke through the silence, but Harry's emotions were not affected by it. This was it, even though he didn't know what to expect from this meeting. He didn't even know what to think of Voldemort anymore. But he knew, with certainly, that there was a huge possibility that one of them was not going to live through it.

His green eyes widened slightly as a dark figure came into view, but otherwise he remained unmoving. Voldemort stopped a short way from him.

"You had time to escape, but instead you trapped yourself in here." the question was asked in low voice. "Why didn't you run?"

"I don't know," answered Harry truthfully. "Perhaps I'm too fed up with running away. I think I'd rather see this to the end."

Voldemort snarled, raising his wand. "Fool! Your supposed bravery will not save you."

Harry bent his knees slightly, ready to dodge at any moment. Still, he didn't raise his wand.

"Still keeping up your act, Potter?" hissed Voldemort. "I have destroyed one traitor today. How wonderful to destroy another now. Isn't it ironic that your attempt to rescue him would bring you directly to me?"

Something stirred within Harry at the word 'traitor'. He looked up and met Voldemort's gaze defiantly.

"Do you really think you can defeat me? Do you really believe that the power you are prophesized to have can help you?" Voldemort continued, very softly, with a dangerous edge in his voice. "But of course, that is why you are here, isn't it? To try and destroy my army from within. To climb up in rank so that you can get close to me and wait for your chance to play the world's savior once again," he spat the word savior. "Isn't that it, Potter?"

Harry clenched his jaw. "That's not true. You know it."

"What I knew is that I should have destroyed you when you first came to me," said Voldemort, utterly ruthless. "But it does not matter. Your plan ends today. You should have known by now. Lord Voldemort hates treachery above all else."

Harry snapped at that. Treachery?

"Is that what you think? Is that all it meant to you?" Harry's voice was equally cold.

Being called traitor by Voldemort had cut him deeper than anything else. As if the dam that had been holding back his emotions was finally broken by Voldemort's words, months of suppressed anger

and hopelessness started to pour through, sweeping away the numbness Harry had been feeling ever since the death of Arthur Weasley.

Voldemort narrowed his eyes and took a deliberate step closer. Harry didn't bother to suppress his instinctive urge to respond to the imminent threat this time. He raised his wand and aimed it straight at the Dark Lord within a blink.

"I've seen your 'power', Potter, I've seen what you are capable of. I know very well what you can do," Voldemort glanced down at him in contempt. "Only mere luck has allowed you to survive until now. Those fools on Dumbledore's side still believe that you are special, so much so that they are willing to protect you with their lives. What a shame, though, that you are nothing."

A fire sparked up in the pair of green eyes at the cutting words. Only it was not the fire of noble courage that had seen Harry through all dangers in his early years at Hogwarts. The fire in Harry's eyes now burnt brighter, more dangerously, as it was fueled with anger. His eyes had a kind of coldness and merciless in them that was not unlike what could be seen in the crimson eyes of the Dark Lord.

"And what would that make you? You are nothing,Voldemort, nothing but a coward who's so afraid of what you can't control that you would rather destroy them all than to face the truth," Harry hissed, ignoring the pain emanating from his Dark Mark. "I don't care about that prophecy. All I wanted was to end the war without having to kill my friend. Is that so hard to understand?" His voice had spiked to shouting level by that last question. Although his body was trembling from his inner turmoil, his wand was steady, as was his cold gaze. "There's no plan to destroy you, not at all! All it has destroyed is me, not you!"

Voldemort looked unaffected, but he remained silent for a long moment before responding.

"Is that all you have to say?" he said, voice hard but quiet. "Do you believe that claiming how much you have sacrificed would convince me to spare you? Do not forget, Potter, that I never forced you to join

me. It was you who had come to me, begging for a place among my servants." He bore his gaze into Harry's "Do not allow your pride to hide the fact that all your so-called suffering and all the lives that have ended because of you are the results of your own decisions."

Harry's magic reacted. It took control, greedily feeding in on his anger. An incantation was already out of his mouth before he was aware of what he was doing. And at that moment, Harry didn't care what happened. As long as he could make his point, as long as he could make Voldemort see how much it had hurt.

"Crucio!" The cruelty in his own voice made Harry's own skin crawl.

A look of surprise momentarily crossed Voldemort's eyes. He stepped close to a side of the corridor and the jet of red light shot past him narrowly, hitting the floor with a sharp, resounding explosion. Waving his wand in a sharp arc, Voldemort sent Harry flying backward onto the ground. Only years of Quidditch training and a strong hold allowed Harry to keep his wand from flying from his grip. He tumbled on the ground but quickly got back on his feet, raising his wand once again. His cold green eyes met Voldemort's, and the snarl on the Dark Lord's face intensified.

"You have no idea of the true nature of the Dark Arts, and yet you still attempt to use them. Against me," Voldemort spat, harshly. "What would the world think of a savior who could not even control his own magic?"

Still heady from the after-effects of the Cruciatus Curse, Harry could hardly take in what Voldemort had said. And his anger, now that it had been released from its cage, took hold of him and refused to let go.

"What would the world think of me?" Harry echoed. "What would the world think of a bloody traitor who turned his back on everyone he cared for and joined the murderer of his own parents?"

Harry hated himself for being so wrong, and he hated the man before him for ever entering his life. Both of his lives, past and present.

His plan had failed miserably. In the end, all he had done was to cause more deaths and aid Voldemort in the war. The only way he might be able to redeem himself in everyone's eyes would be to be to defeat Voldemort once and for all. So however small his chance might be, he was going to try.

"You should be relieved that you'll be joining your parents soon, Potter. There will be no more complications this time," said Voldemort.

Harry knew that there was nothing more to say. All that was left to do was to end this ridiculous charade in a way they were probably destined to from the very beginning.

Wordlessly, he shifted into a dueling stance. Months of self-training at both Hogwarts and Voldemort's manor had made him stronger, both physically and magically, and he refused to accept defeat before the duel had even begun.

But the duel never started. Their wands were raised against each other, but before any of them could fire a curse, their wands began to glow. The glow was faint at first, but quickly built up into an almost-blinding, golden light. The soft sounds of phoenix song echoed in Harry's mind, draining the anger inside him that had been raging mere moments ago. Light extended from the tips of both wands, and like a golden thread, joined in the middle to link them up. The wand in Harry's hand was shaking violently, and at that moment, Harry suddenly understood what this display meant.

The wands- the brother wands -refused to be used to attack each other.

He could feel Voldemort, clearer than Occlumency had ever allowed him to. It was as though they were one. Harry could almost hear the faint sound of Voldemort's heartbeat, and he could read the bright threads of emotions that stood out among the sea of darkness.

This had happened before, fifty years ago. Images began to flash across Harry's mind. They were blurred, misty from time, but he knew what they were, all of them. He shook his head, trying to struggle against the flow of memories that was soon flooding his mind. He

wouldn't stand a chance against Voldemort if he was caught in some kind of vision. It would give Voldemort his chance-

But the power coming from the bonded wands was too strong. The light was glowing brighter still, and Harry soon found himself slowly closing his eyes. He could see Hogwarts. He could hear voices echoing in the space around him, his own voice… and Tom's.

They were in the great hall. Alex had just been sorted into Slytherin.

"I'm Alex, Alex Salutor."

"Tom Riddle."

The images shifted. He was now at the Room of Requirement.

Alex had spent countless hours in this room. It was in there that Tom would share with him what he had never told anyone else.

"Those muggles… I hate them. I will never forgive them."

"Don't do anything stupid, Tom."

"I won't."

"You are not alone."

"I know."

Harry forced his eyes open for a split second to find Voldemort frowning, his eyes closed like Harry's had been. But before Harry could make sense of what he had seen, he was dragged into another memory, this time in the tunnel leading to the Chamber of Secrets.

"Why are you here? You could have died."

Alex rounded on Tom, who had deliberately left him behind and run off recklessly for the Chamber alone.

"Why am I here? Because you could have died! What do you think you are doing?"

"You shouldn't be involved in this. It's my own problem."

"I thought we're friends."

"We are! That's why I don't want you to come. I don't want to pull my...my only friend into danger."

Harry didn't even have time to brace himself before another memory hit him. It was one that he recognized right away. The promise.

"I must go back, but it doesn't mean we won't see each other again in the future. I just have to find you when I get back."

"But you don't even know when you came from. What if you came from hundreds of years from the future? What if I've already... died at the time you came from?"

"Then I'll find a way. Another time travel. Whatever. I will find a way to get to you."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Harry snapped his eyes open as that memory ended, gasping for breath. He felt his eyes sting, and he realized with a shock that he had been crying. Those memories were simply too much. It was too cruel a reminder of a past he wished had never existed, and of a promise he had tried so hard, but failed to keep.

'I've tried, Tom, I've really tried. But one can only hope for so many times before they learn to give up.'

Drops of tears rolled down his cheeks, and Harry angrily wiped them off with his sleeve. He had fallen into this trap before, the trap of the past, but he would not do so again. He had tried, he had hoped, and finally, he had learned his lesson.

He strengthened his grip on his wand, which was shaking so violently that it was almost jerking itself out of his hand. But he wouldn't let go. He clenched it with so much force that his knuckles turned white, willing it to listen to his command, to understand that this fight was necessary. And still his wand continued to struggle. Both wands were relentlessly trying to fight against their masters.

Lifting his head, Harry's eyes found Voldemort for the first time since the visions had started. The Dark Lord was staring straight at him. His face was stoic, but his eyes were flashing with a strange light that Harry couldn't quite comprehend. Through the bond, though, Harry could see much more than what his eyes could tell him.

There were so many emotions, so much more than he had ever felt from the Dark Lord. The emotions were replacing each another so fast that Harry was unable to tell what they meant; they were all so conflicting with each another that Harry couldn't even tell what Voldemort was truly feeling. But it all meant nothing, Harry told himself, this sudden flash of… humanity was all that was left. Soon, like every other time, the darkness inside Voldemort would vanquish everything.

He would not allow himself to hope. Never again. Voldemort had been right on one thing – the only way this could end was when one of them killed the other.

And as though Harry's silent thoughts had finally convinced their rebelling wands, the glow of the wands slowly died down, resigned to the fact that a fight against their own brother was inevitable.

Voldemort stared at his wand for a moment before training it once again on Harry. He seemed to have recovered and looked completely unaffected by what had just happened, just as Harry had predicted. Anticipating an attack, Harry quickly pushed those thoughts away and readied his own wand.

"You have seen me duel, Potter," said Voldemort flatly. "You know you cannot win."

Without waiting for Harry's reply, Voldemort attacked. It was a curse that Harry didn't recognize, and it came so fast that Harry didn't have time to dodge. He had to block it.

"Protego!" Harry yelled.

Harry's shield held back the brunt of Voldemort's curse, but the power of the curse still managed to knock him backward. And it was just like the time he dueled Dumbledore. Harry could already tell that he was going to lose.

Harry noticed that Voldemort was only using non-lethal curses, but that had not diminished his power. The duel ended quickly, with Voldemort disarming Harry and leaving him lying immobilized on the floor. This was, perhaps, a result that had not come as a surprise for both of them.

"You will be stopped, Voldemort, even if it's not by me," said Harry quietly, even when he was lying on his back with Voldemort's wand pointing straight at him.

Voldemort sneered. "The old fool can do nothing, Potter. Your death would mark the victory of my conquest."

Harry found himself smiling bitterly. "Then I suppose I still somehow managed to help you then? By sending your worst enemy right into your hand," he said, finding it strangely ironic. "But it has always been this way, hasn't it? Come to think of it, I never did manage to make you see things from my way, never once. It was always me running circles for you. I should have known I'd assumed too much. Otherwise, you wouldn't have become the way you are now, would you?"

He felt a lump in his throat as he said that. He closed his eyes, resigned. It seemed like no matter what he did, the memories of that year in the past still managed to control him. No matter what Voldemort had done, he would always be Tom Riddle for Alex Salutor.

Opening his eyes again, he stared steadily into Voldemort's eyes. He could see a strange gleam inside the pair of crimson eyes, but it did not matter anymore.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked, in a surprisingly calm voice.

The wait was becoming suffocating, especially since he knew what was to come. Had his mother felt the same way when she stood up to Voldemort?

The seconds passed like years, and still the curse had not come. What was happening? Did Voldemort plan to torture him? Or did he want to humiliate him publicly, to mock him for his foolishness?

But Voldemort seemed to be struggling with himself. Through their bond, though not as strong as it had been when their wands were connected, Harry could once again feel the conflicting emotions flowing from Voldemort. It went on for some time before the battling thoughts suddenly stopped altogether, as though Voldemort had finally reached a decision.

"It seems we did agree with one thing, Potter," Voldemort's voice was quiet with an undertone that Harry had never heard before. "It would be best, for the both of us, if Alex Salutor had never existed."

"What-" Harry tensed. Why did he have a feeling that something was going to be very wrong?

As Voldemort pressed his wand between Harry's eyes, a single pulse of thought traveled through the bond, and Harry realized with horror what exactly Voldemort was planning to do. His felt his blood turn cold.

"No," he said, staring at the Dark Lord in disbelief, "you can't."

Voldemort paused, but only for a brief second before his eyes hardened. Without warning, Harry felt as though his head was about to burst open. He knew what was coming, and he knew nothing could stop it now. A tear slowly slid down his cheek at what was to come, and what he was going to lose forever. His green eyes, which were

filled with so much pain at that moment, refused to leave Voldemort's crimson pair even as the world around him slowly began to dissolve.

"Obliviate."

Chapter 29: Redefined Identity

"- saw something."

Everything was spinning. His head hurt. He could hear a voice, and he could hear footsteps coming near to him

"- be careful. We don't know what we might find -"

He let out a groan as a new wave of pain swept through him. Scattered images flashed across his mind, but he did not have time to sense of any of them before the images were consumed by the ever-burning fire that had spread throughout his body.

"- at that scar. Could he be -"

He struggled to open his eyes. Despite his blurred vision, he could see two men peering down at him.

"Hey, are you all right?" said one of them.

He couldn't answer. More images, both familiar and unfamiliar, continued to assault him. They were overwhelming his mind.

"Just hold on," another voice said, sounding panicked. "We- we'll call for-"

Blackness was eating away at the sides of his vision. Unconsciousness threatened to take over him, and he welcomed it.

--

Percy was woken up by noise coming from outside his room. He could hear his Mum's voice. She was speaking to someone with a much deeper voice… Kingsley. Could they be talking about Snape? Percy knew that the Order's spy had been rescued earlier that day and sent to St Mungo's - a few rooms away from the ward he was currently staying in, actually. Snape had been in very bad shape when he was brought in. Percy wondered how the older man was doing now.

Feeling the dizziness from his potion-induced sleep slowly dispersing, Percy pushed himself up slightly, moving his pillow so he could sit up. He was satisfied when he found that his wounds had, at last, stopped hurting even with movement. He should be able to return to work soon and rejoin the war. More importantly, he could finally stop being a burden to his family.

He turned towards the doorway. He could hear Bill's voice now, but he couldn't make out what Bill was saying. Percy's heart sank. Why were his brother and mother involved? Had anything happened? Percy desperately hoped that he was merely over-reacting. The past two weeks had been hard enough for his family. Although he himself had been drifting in and out of consciousness for most of the first week, he could still remember his Mum crying by his bedside and the grief written clearly over all of his siblings' faces. Even the twins had ceased joking around.

Only eight hands were left on the Weasleys' family clock. And Percy had been there when it happened. He had been in the same room as his father when Voldemort fired the killing curse. He had been only inches away when his father collapsed onto the ground and never opened his eyes again.

And he had been offered a chance to prevent all these from happening.

Percy pushed that thought away roughly. He knew without a shadow of doubt that had he become a Death Eater, for whatever reason, he would have failed his family in the worse way possible again. He suspected that part of the guilt he was feeling now would never go away, but he could live with that, so long as he knew with a calming certainty that he did not have the Dark Mark on his arm, knew that he had made a choice he would not regret.

The memories of his escape that day were hazy. All he could remember was that he had been very close to death by the time he made it out of Voldemort's manor. In his severely weakened and disorientated state, he had somehow managed to splinch himself when he apparated back to the Order headquarters.

Percy had been sent to St. Mungo's right away. The injuries from the splinch had mended perfectly, but the deep cut on his face from Voldemort himself simply refused to be healed by any means and had ended up getting infected. All the healers could do had been to sustain Percy's life long enough for the wound to close up naturally and prevent any further infection. It had taken a whole week for the wound to finally close up, leaving behind a nasty, still-red scar that ran from Percy's left forehead to nearly his jaw. It cut right through his left eye, which had been destroyed beyond repair the moment Voldemort cursed him.

Percy took in a shaky breath to calm himself. Even now, recalling the events on the day his father died still hurt. The only person whom he had recounted his meeting with Voldemort in full detail was Dumbledore, and even that had taken great effort. The Aurors had also questioned him, but he had only told them all they needed to know, nothing more and nothing else. He felt slightly guilty for leaving out some of the details, but that had not bothered him as much as it ought to have.

After facing Voldemort in a meeting he never thought he could have survived, the whole world seemed- different somehow, and Percy knew he had changed. Other than the fact that he now didn't even flinch when he said the name Voldemort, Percy still couldn't pinpoint exactly what was different about himself. Though, his family seemed pleased at the changes in him, with the twins more amused than the rest.

"Lie back down, Percy." His mother's voice shook Percy out of his thoughts. "You shouldn't be up yet, dear."

Percy looked up as his mother rushed from the doorway to his bedside, followed closely by Bill. The scar on Percy's face stretched uncomfortably as he moved his head. Everything still looked strange to him with only one eye to see with.

"I'm fine, Mum. I'm feeling much better now," he said reassuringly. "I heard you talking with Kingsley outside. Did anything happen?"

It was Bill who answered, smiling in a way that told Percy it was good news, something that came very rarely these days. "It's Harry. He has been found."

Percy froze.

"He's still unconscious, but the healers said his condition is stable," Bill continued. "He should be waking up very soon."

"The poor dear." His mother looked very worried. "Who knows what those monsters have done to him?"

Percy finally found his voice. "Harry is here?" he asked, in sheer disbelief. "In St. Mungo's?"

"Someone found him near Hogsmeade a few hours ago. It caused quite a commotion, but the Aurors stepped in and brought him here," Bill answered. "No one knows what happened to him and why he was there, because the Aurors wouldn't let anyone except Dumbledore into his room."

Percy's mind was still trying to comprehend what he had just heard. Harry had been found… No, he had been captured. And he was now being guarded by Aurors.

"Is it because of Pettigrew's confession?" he asked tightly.

Bill nodded. "The Aurors are going to question him when he wakes up, even though everyone knows how ridiculous Pettigrew's claim was," he said. "Kingsley said it's just standard precaution, but it doesn't sound that 'standard' to me when the Minister himself is coming right now."

"The Minister?" Percy paled.

"Harry must have suffered for months already and they are treating the poor boy like a criminal! What are they thinking?" exclaimed his mother. "I can't believe Albus would let them do that."

A healer passing by shot them a disapproving look at the raised voices.

"I'm sure Harry will be just fine. Dumbledore will take care of everything," said Bill reassuringly.

Percy couldn't blame his mother for being so worried after all that had happened. But unlike Bill, he couldn't bring himself to say anything to reassure her that Harry would be perfectly fine. He knew that it would be a lie.

If the Aurors were already there and the Minister himself was coming, then it was only a matter a time before the truth about Harry spilled out. And that thought filled Percy with an unexpected feeling of dread.

Even through the mess that had been the previous two weeks, Percy knew one fact for certain – the fact that Harry Potter had saved his life. Once again, he had witnessed the exchange between Harry and Voldemort. And he had heard enough to understand just what had saved his life. For some reason that Percy dreaded to know, Harry had saved Voldemort's life in the past, resulting in a life debt that the Dark Lord had paid through sparing Percy's life. That knowledge made him felt strangely burdened.

Percy did feel gratitude for Harry, of course. He was also aware that, in turn, he now owed Harry a life debt. And if he was honest with himself, he had no idea what he should do about it.

Harry had saved his life, but Harry was also a Death Eater- and a murderer.

"-get over to Harry's room again," his mother was saying. "But are you sure you are feeling well, Percy? Do you need anything? You look a little pale."

Percy managed to smile weakly at her, assuaging her worries for a moment. Ever protective, his mother checked over his wounds again before leaving for Harry's ward. Bill stayed behind.

"I'm worried about her," he said, finally allowing his mask of calmness to break as he sat down on the chair next to Percy's bed. "Mum's hardly rested these two weeks with you injured and Dad-" he trailed off, shaking his head. "But at least we have Harry back now."

Percy leaned back on his pillows. "How's Harry?" he asked warily. "You said he's unconscious."

Bill answered, "The healers said he's fine. At least physically."

"Physically?"

Bill eyed Percy for a long while. Then he leaned in closer and said in a low voice, "I haven't told Mum any of this yet. I didn't want to worry her any further." He paused, hesitated. "I was asking about Harry's condition earlier and I heard from Kingsley that they found… something on Harry's arm."

"A Dark Mark." The words were out of Percy's mouth before he realized what he had just said.

Bill nodded, giving him another questioning look. "Harry didn't seem to have suffered from any other external injuries, but if that Mark is any indication, I dread to know what else You-Know-Who has done to him."

So Bill thought Harry had been marked against his will by Voldemort as some kind of torture. Percy was astonished at the fact that no one from the Order seemed to have even considered the possibility of Harry voluntarily joining Voldemort. Having learned of the truth for months now, Percy found it difficult to understand the unshakable belief everyone had in Harry's loyalty, even with such obvious evidence as Pettigrew's confession under Veriteserum and the Dark Mark.

"Now out with it, Percy," said Bill with a fleeting hint of amusement mixed with concern. "You know something, don't you? You've been acting strange since hearing Harry's name."

Percy clenched his jaw. He was tempted to tell Bill everything. But the whole tale was so absurd that Percy himself could hardly believe it, had he not seen it for his own eyes. There was no way Bill would believe him. How could he explain to Bill that Harry was indeed a Death Eater who had been working for Voldemort for months? How could he explain that the only reason he was still alive right now was also because of Harry?

"There's a lot going on in the background, Bill, much more than you would believe," he said finally.

"Maybe you should explain from the beginning?" suggested Bill, smiling slightly.

Percy shook his head at the madness of it all. He didn't even know when the beginning was. A year ago? Fifty years ago?

He stared at the door his mother had exited from earlier. Then, with a heavy, burdensome sense of weariness, he answered tiredly, "It is not my place to tell."

--

Nicolas crushed heavily into the shelf where he stored his various magical stones. He felt his lungs burn as he struggled to draw in harsh breaths. He opened his eyes to see that Voldemort had walked across the room and was now towering above him. It was easy to tell that this visit of the Dark Lord was unlike any of the previous ones. Voldemort was furious. His merciless red eyes were filled with madness.

"What happened, To-"

"Crucio!"

Nicolas shut his eyes tight. The fiery pain quickly consumed his old, frail body, but he forced himself not to make a sound as Voldemort watched on emotionlessly. Minutes passed before the Dark Lord lifted the torturous curse.

"What happened, Tom?" Nicolas repeated his earlier question, his voice weaker. When the Dark Lord did not answer, he sighed. "I am not afraid of death. I should have died long ago. But at least tell me this. How is Harry?"

The madness in Voldemort's eyes had dissipated somehow, but the anger remained, as well as a chaotic kind of confusion that only someone who knew him as well as Nicolas did could see.

"Are you just here to kill me?" pressed Nicolas. "Talk to me, Tom."

And Voldemort did so, to Nicolas' surprise.

"Are you aware of the prophecy, Flamel?"

Nicolas paled. "The one between you and Harry? Yes, I know of it."

"And of its contents, I am sure," said Voldemort slowly, quietly, his eyes once again flashing menacingly. "And yet you knowingly sent Potter to me. Did you really believe that I, Lord Voldemort, could be deceived that easily?"

"I did not send Harry to you, as you very well know," said Nicolas. "All I did was to tell Harry the prophecy and let him decide for himself. And you already understand what he has chosen." He looked up at Voldemort and asked carefully, "What have you done to him, Tom?"

Once again, Voldemort surprised Nicolas by answering. His response was short, but Nicolas could tell that it was an honest answer. Whatever had happened had obviously enraged Voldemort, but it had also shaken him deeply. And for the first time in many years, Voldemort was desperate enough to actually listen to what Nicolas had to say.

"Potter was foolish enough to trap himself in my dungeon after breaking out one of my prisoners. I tracked him down and we dueled."

"And?" pressed Nicolas, growing more worried with each second.

"Potter's skill was no match for mine."

Something in Voldemort's eyes alarmed Nicolas. "Where is Harry now?" he asked, dreading the answer.

"I did not kill him." Voldemort glanced coldly at Nicolas. "He should be in the Aurors' hands right now."

Nicolas was relieved that Harry was still alive, but he was no less worried. "You let the Aurors capture him?" It was not unheard of for Voldemort to abandon his followers this way, but Nicolas had thought Tom would have more sense than to-

"The Ministry will not be able to accuse the boy of anything," said Voldemort. For a brief second, Nicolas thought he saw a look of pain cross the pair of red eyes. "Potter will not remember anything."

Nicolas' head snapped up. "What did you say?" His mind tried to comprehend what the Dark Lord meant and he arrived at only one possible conclusion. "You obliviated him," he said, unable to hide the utter disbelief in his voice.

Voldemort's emotions were masked now. His eyes were cold when he answered. "Alex Salutor was never meant to exist," he said. "He was but the result of your meddling with time, Flamel. You should be glad I did not kill him."

"But you did, Tom," said Nicolas after he had recovered enough from his shock to speak. His tone was hard and accusing. "You killed Alex."

Those words seemed to have hit Voldemort hard, as they should have.

"Just what were you trying to accomplish? To make him see you as an enemy? To make him hate you again?" Nicolas' gaze narrowed as the Dark Lord remained silent. "Answer me, Tom!"

Voldemort snarled. "You are in no position to talk to me in that tone, Flamel. I can easily kill you right now."

"Then do it. You know very well I don't have the strength to fight back," countered Nicolas, still leaning heavily on his half-broken shelf for support. "Or do you wish to erase my memories of you as well? I've known you for over fifty years, Tom. I met you when you were still a child who wanted to be loved."

"I am not that helpless child anymore, Flamel," hissed Voldemort. "My power-"

"You power is nothing compared to what that child once had," said Nicolas. "Why else would you erase all trances of your past existence? You are afraid of that child, Tom, of the person that you once were."

Nicolas was not surprised to find himself once again at wand-point, but he was not about to back down. "Go on, Tom, a simple killing curse and you can destroy me like you did Alex," he said. "No one will remind you of your past then. No one will ever doubt that you are anything but the Dark Lord you claim to be," he looked straight into Voldemort's eyes, "and no one will ever try to make you feel again."

For a split second, Nicolas could see Voldemort's conflicting emotions, as well as an overwhelming amount of pain – unacknowledged pain that was almost constantly masked under the thick cloud of anger and hatred. Nicolas felt his own anger dissolve. He let out a weary sigh, tired of the mess surrounding the two wizards he had come to care as his own.

He did not have the full picture of what had transpired, but he knew enough to guess what Voldemort had not told him.

It was obvious that Voldemort had tried to kill Harry, but he could not do so in the end. Nicolas knew that it was due to the exact same reason why Harry couldn't bring himself to fight against Voldemort in the war. Facing the same dilemma, Harry had chosen to become a Death Eater in hopes of saving his friend, but Voldemort had chosen to turn away from his past and erase the existence of Alex… for what?

"You erased Harry's memories because you couldn't bear to end the life of someone who deeply cared for you. You thought you could kill him if he no longer remembers you, but you're wrong, Tom." Voldemort snarled, but Nicolas pressed on, ignoring the wand aimed at him. Something needed to be said, and Nicolas knew he was probably the only one aside from Harry who could have said it and have any effect on the Dark Lord. "Can't you see? The reverse happened. Tom Riddle died in Harry today, but Alex continued to live on in you." Nicolas searched Voldemort's eyes for any sign of understanding. He was not surprised to find none. "Even though Harry now considers you as nothing more than an enemy, you still will not be able to kill him."

What Nicolas did not say was that by oblivating Harry, Voldemort had freed Harry of that terrible restraint. For the sake of the war, Albus would probably welcome what Voldemort had done. But was it really for the best?

"I may have shown mercy today, but there will not be a second time." Voldemort looked down at Nicolas. "And do you understand what that means, Flamel?"

"I've told you, Tom, I am not afraid of death." Nicolas smiled sadly. "It is you who should be afraid of it."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes. Nicolas could feel power pouring out from the tip of Voldemort's wand, directing at him. But it didn't matter. He had done all he could. The rest would be up to Tom himself.

"Save yourself, my child," he said, giving a final piece of advice to the wizard that had brought him both great joy and deep disappointment. "That is the least you can do to earn Alex's forgiveness."

A flash of green light blinded his vision. Then all was gone.

--

He opened his eyes slowly. Everything was blurred and his mind was strangely blank. Where was he?

A shadowy figure approached him and he tensed without understanding why. Then he felt his glasses being pushed back gently onto his face.

The world became clear at once and an old man with long beard came into view. The grave expression on his face was a huge contrast to his bright purple robe.

"Harry?"

It took him a few seconds before he recognized that name. His own name.

"How are you feeling, Harry?"

"Professor Dumbledore." He was startled at how weak he sounded. "Where- where am I, sir?"

Dumbledore looked different. Harry didn't remember a time when Dumbledore looked so tired and… so defeated.

"You are in St. Mungo's Hospital," answered Dumbledore.

"Hospital?" Harry repeated. "But why- what happened?" And why couldn't he remember it?

"You were found in Hogsmeade earlier today, Harry." Dumbledore informed him. "I was hoping you could tell me what you were doing there."

"But I-" Harry shifted uneasily under Dumbeldore's intense gaze. "I didn't go to Hogsmeade, sir. I was in-" Where had he been? His mind was blank and thinking made his head hurt even more.

Dumbledore took the seat next to Harry's bed, not unlike the time when he visited Harry in the hospital wing at the end of his first year. But why did it feel so different now? Harry struggled to stop himself from panicking as, once again, his memory drew a blank.

"Ah, perhaps we should work this out together, Harry? I dare say I am quite good at guessing," said Dumbledore. "Earlier today, Vodemort learned of a secret. I have been trying to prevent this moment from happening ever since our last meeting, but it seems that I was too late. With that new knowledge, Voldemort targeted you once again, and that was why you escaped to Hogsmeade."

Harry had no idea what Dumbledore was talking about, but his whole body tensed at the mention of the Dark Lord. Had he fallen into some kind of trap set up by Voldemort, only to be rescued now? Dumbledore talked about escaping, but what did he mean by Voldemort knowing a secret? And what was it about-

"Our last meeting, sir?" he asked. As soon as the words left his mouth, Harry knew it was not the right question. His breath caught as Dumbledore bent over and looked deep into his eyes, looking more serious than ever.

"I have asked you then, Harry," began Dumbledore, "and I'll ask you again now." His voice was quiet but hard. His gaze was piercing. "Why?"

Some part of Harry' s mind reacted instinctively the moment his eyes met Dumbledore's. A shield slammed up around his mind, protecting his thoughts.

At that moment, the fact that he knew what he had just done was a kind of defensive mind magic called Occlumency – something he had never even heard of before - scared him much more than Dumbledore's imposing presence.

"Even now you would not tell me." Dumbledore sighed when Harry failed to answer. "I would have helped you, Harry, had you come to me first."

The clear disappointment on Dumbledore's face was too much for Harry to handle. "Please, sir," he said, unable to contain his frustration and nervousness any longer. "What's going on? Why am I in a hospital and why are you –" He took in a breath in an attempt to calm himself. "Can you please tell me what happened, sir?"

That obviously was not what Dumbledore had expected.

"I wonder…" he muttered.

"Sir?" Harry eyed Dumbledore uncertainly.

Once again Dumbledore looked into Harry's eyes, this time more thoughtful than before. For a split second, Harry thought he saw a look of shock crossing Dumbledore's blue eyes.

What seemed like ages later, Dumbledore finally straightened up. He gave Harry a gentle smile, as though finally sensing Harry's discomfort and confusion. But if that smile was supposed to be reassuring, it certainly wasn't working.

"What is the last thing you remember, Harry?"

As simple as that question seemed to be, Harry found himself struggling with the answer. What had happened before he somehow ended up in the hospital? He remembered the Triwizard Tournament. He remembered spending time in Grimmauld Place. But his memories ended there.

"What date is today, sir?" asked Harry, for some reason feeling that something else had happened after the end of his fourth year, something… important.

"It's May 20, 1996," said Dumbledore quietly.

Harry froze. "But that would be… the end of my fifth year." He stared at Dumbledore with wide eyes, hoping that the professor would tell him it was only a joke. A whole year? How was that possible? "I don't even remember going to Hogwarts. I-"

Dumbledore placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "It's all right, my boy, don't push yourself too hard."

"But sir-"

The door of the hospital room opened before Harry could respond and three men strode in. Harry recognized one of them as Kingsley, a member of the Order of the Phoenix. He was wearing the same set of robe as one of the other wizards. That robe seemed familiar -

Harry stiffened, recognizing those robes as those worn only by Aurors. His mind snapped into alert almost instinctively… but why? They were just Aurors, not his enemies, were they?

"You are not supposed to be in here, Dumbledore," said the wizard accompanied by the two Aurors. The wizard held himself with an air of authority. He was staring at Harry with sharp gaze through his wire-rimmed spectacles.

"Ah, Scrimgeour," greeted Dumbledore, standing up from his chair. "Harry, this is Rufus Scrimgeour, the Minister of Magic."

Harry tried hard to mask his surprise. Since when was there a new Minister? Where was Fudge?

"Mr. Potter, you are hereby detained for suspected involvement in Death Eaters activities, your trial will be held-"

"What?" Shocked by the outrageous claim, Harry pushed himself up from his bed, easily ignoring the waves of dizziness that hit him at once. His eyes widened in pure disbelief. "You are accusing me of being a Death Eater?"

Scrimgeour's face remained stoic. "I hate to do this, Potter, but you're not leaving me with a choice." He gestured at the two Aurors behind him.

"You will do no such thing, Minister." Dumbledore stepped in. "As of today, Mr. Potter is still a student at Hogwarts, which means his safety remains my responsibility."

"Surely you are not protecting him, Dumbledore?" Scrimgeour gave the Aurors behind him a hand signal. "The Ministry does not do anything without evidence."

Harry watched warily as the Auror he couldn't recognize approached him. He sneaked a look at Dumbledore, who, to his disappointment, made no move to intervene this time. The Auror stopped next to his bedside and roughly grabbed Harry's left arm. Startled, Harry pulled back his arm in reflex, but Auror merely tightened his grip and pulled up Harry's sleeve with his other hand.

Time seemed to have stopped. Harry was aware of the commotion around him, but his gaze was fixed only on his own arm… and the Dark Mark that was burnt on it.

Then Harry remembered. Flashes of memories emerged, scattered but real. He remembered Voldemort burning the Mark on his arm with a sadistic glint in his red eyes. He remembered being held by some kind of spell that made him weak and light-headed. He remembered standing in the middle of a burning village, surrounded by dead bodies.

Harry felt himself trembling, both in horror and in anger. What had he done? What had Voldemort done to him?

"The boy is a Death Eater. Are you still trying to deny it?" Harry dimly heard Scrimgeour's voice. "You cannot protect him any longer, Dumbledore."

"On the contrary, Scrimgeour," replied Dumbledore calmly. "I ask you to first listen to what Harry has to say before drawing any conclusions."

"The Dark Mark alone is enough to prove-"

"Nothing," Harry cut in, his tone harsh. "I am not a Death Eater and I will never be one. Voldemort forced that Mark on me."

"A mere claim like that won't let you get off scot-free, boy," growled Scrimgeour.

"I was captured and Voldemort found it more amusing to torture me than to kill me. He used some kind of spell on me and made me do things against my will." Harry stared defiantly at Scrimgeour.

"Voldemort killed my parents and has been trying to kill me for years. I'd rather die than join him."

A moment of silence followed before Scrimgeour spoke again. "That is quite a story, Potter," he said, "but I wonder if you would say the same under Veritaserum?"

Harry clenched his fists. "I'm not lying!"

"Any means to confirm Mr. Potter's claim would have to wait," interrupted Dumbledore firmly, addressing Scrimgeour. "You already have a trial scheduled, I believe, Minister?"

Scrimgeour looked annoyed, but he finally relented. "Very well," he said. "The trial will be in three days. It would be in your best interest to cooperate with the Ministry then, Mr. Potter."

With that said, Scrimgeour nodded at the two Aurors and the three walked out of the room, leaving Harry and Dumbledore behind.

"Sir, I -" Harry bowed his head.

Dumbledore put a hand on his trembling shoulder. "You are safe now, Harry," he said quietly, looking at Harry with a strange look of sadness.

Harry did not understand what that look meant, but after the whole encounter with the Minister of Magic, all those questions that Dumbledore had asked him earlier made sense now. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, Harry realized that Dumbledore, too, believed him to be a Death Eater. And he couldn't help feeling… betrayed.

But it was not Dumbledore's fault, not even Scrimgeour's fault. Harry still couldn't remember everything in the past year clearly, but there was no mistake as to what had happened and who had caused it.

"Why can't I remember everything, sir?" he asked. "I remember what Voldemort has done to me and I remember him controlling me, but my memories about the rest of the time are all unclear. I only remember going to battle and-" Harry closed his eyes as a

tremendous amount of guilt rushed over him. He only had some vague images in his mind about the battles, but those were more than enough to tell him what he had done. It didn't matter whether he was under Voldemort's control or not.

"It could be due to the spell Voldemort used to control your actions," said Dumbledore, "or that Voldemort has a hand in the loss of your memories." He paused. "Tom has always been good at modifying memories."

Rage filled Harry at the mention of that name. Tom Riddle… Voldemort, the man who ruined his life time and again.

But there would not be a next time. Harry's green eyes turned cold as he vowed to himself that the next time they met again, he would kill Voldemort, the monster who had forced him to become a murderer.

"You should rest now, Harry," said Dumbledore softly. "We will talk more tomorrow."

Still trembling with emotions, Harry said nothing as Dumbledore helped him lie back down on his bed. With a promise to visit again the next day, Dumbledore left the room, looking even more shaken than when Harry had first woken up.

Turning to his side, Harry stared blankly at the white wall of the hospital. What had he missed during the time he was being held as Voldemort's prisoner? What had the world become after nearly a whole year? Had his friends moved on without him?

At those thoughts and all the questions that he didn't have an answer to, Harry suddenly felt very helpless. Absently, his fingers brushed past the thin thread hanging around his neck until he reached something solid hidden just beneath his clothes. His closed his hand on the small object, feeling as though he had done that many times before. Almost immediately, a strong feeling of warmth flowed through him.

Finally realizing what he was doing, Harry immediately removed his hand. What was that?

Looking down to his chest, Harry cautiously pulled out the object hanging around his neck. It was a necklace, with a crystal attached to the end of it. Harry had no idea where this necklace had come from, nor did he remember ever owning anything like that.

His eyes were drawn to the glowing crystal. It was a beautiful sight. As if something had been triggered by the sight, a wave of the strangest of emotions suddenly emerged from somewhere deep inside him. Harry didn't know why he was feeling this way. There was happiness, but there was also sadness. He felt safe and protected, but at the same time he felt a deep sense of loneliness and anger.

Harry would soon learn to hate his conflicting feelings, which he never understood and which, despite everything, would eventually bring him closer to a past that was probably best forgotten.

Clenched tight in Harry's hand, the small crystal glowed brighter than ever in the darkness, as if it was welcoming a change in the future, as if it was anticipating the day when the pair of best friends and worst enemies would cross paths once again for one final time.

End of part two

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A/N: Finally, the end of Friend or Foe. Sorry for the 'ending', I know you probably want to kill me now...

As you can see from that last paragraph, yes, there will be a sequel, though it may not be what you expect. I will start working on it after my exams, so expect it around the end of May. Again, it may not be what you expect.

Anyway, now that we have reached the end of this fic, it's time for review! Please tell me what you think about this story so I can do better next time. It's been a long time since I posted the first chapter of this story and I thank you all for following this till the end (even though it is not really the end yet).

(As a side note, I am updating Rectifier again. It is a 'dimension travel' story. If you are interested, you can find the link in my profile.)

5/6/2008: For the benefit of those who have put this story in story alert, the sequel is now posted! You can find the sequel Proof of Existence in my profile.